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THESIS

VIETNAMESE STRATEGIC CULTURE AND THE COMING STRUGGLE FOR THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

by

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December, 1996

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**VIETNAMESE STRATEGIC CULTURE
AND THE COMING STRUGGLE
FOR THE SOUTH CHINA SEA**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

Despite inferior strength, Vietnam clings to extensive claims in the South China Sea in conflict with China's claims. Through use of the concept of "strategic culture," this thesis investigates the factors, including perceived historical lessons, that drive Vietnam to maintain this strategic posture. The most relevant lessons are that (1) China perpetually desires and frequently attempts to dominate Vietnam, and that resistance historically has served Vietnam better than appeasement; and (2) Vietnam has the inherent ability to attract foreign benefactors that will help her balance against Chinese power and achieve her own goals. The author explores how these lessons have shaped a modern-day Vietnamese strategic culture and whether it is suited to the strategic realities that Vietnam currently faces. A conclusion is that Vietnam's current strategic culture is likely to continue either until it is shown to be inadequate in conflict with China over control of the South China Sea, or until Vietnam succeeds in attracting a new benefactor or protector.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This thesis attempts to answer why Vietnam maintains claims in the South China Sea, in direct competition with China's claims, while her actual ability to defend those claims is severely deficient. This thesis argues that the concept of "strategic culture," emphasizing the importance and persistence of historical experience in shaping national strategy, explains how Vietnamese leaders' perceptions of historical lessons have driven territorial and strategic overreach. Those lessons are that Vietnam has fared better resisting than appeasing China in conflicts, and that Vietnam has the ability to marshal foreign support to achieve her aims. While those assertions at times have proved viable, faith in them now is unjustified.

Vietnam is in a "strategic predicament" - possessing inadequate naval and air power to defend her claims, having no allies to make up the difference, yet dependent on the oil receipts she currently earns from her South China Sea claims. Also, the Vietnamese Communist Party is effectively unable to back down from her current claims for fear of losing domestic political legitimacy.

China and Vietnam have a complicated history and a long-standing rivalry which helps explain why Vietnam's behavior toward China is often far more antagonistic than might be expected from a much smaller and weaker neighbor. China's proximity and overpowering size, and the constant threat of Chinese domination or invasion, both forged and continues to shape Vietnamese strategic culture more than any other factor.

Over two millennia ago the Chinese Empire conquered the ancient kingdom of Vietnam's forebearers and made it the southernmost Chinese province. Chinese rule would last a thousand years and be marked by nearly constant revolt by independence-minded Vietnamese, but Chinese rule was also made possible by Vietnamese divisiveness and collaboration. China significantly influenced Vietnamese culture, for even when Chinese rule was thrown off in the 10th century Vietnam remained a Confucian society and a tributary state to the Chinese Emperor. Chinese invasions and rule would reoccur periodically, but Vietnam mostly remained independent. And Vietnam was expansive as well, conquering some of its own smaller neighbors during its centuries of tributary independence.

As Vietnamese territory expanded, the cohesiveness of its strategic culture decreased and the divisiveness of its people increased. Competing northern and southern dynasties emerged and warred almost constantly with each other for centuries, leaving the country weakened and vulnerable to external intervention just as Europeans began arriving in Asia. These foreigners and their new technologies altered the balance of power in Vietnam as early as the mid-17th century. A dramatic example of this new element of Vietnamese strategic culture - the use of foreign benefactors to achieve Vietnamese goals - emerged at the end of the 18th century. In 1802 the Emperor Gia Long gained his throne, and reunified Vietnam after centuries of internal division, with the military assistance of an intrepid French missionary. Quickly afterwards, however, the Vietnamese leader repudiated his French benefactors and returned Vietnam - albeit temporarily - to its tributary status with China.

The rise of French power and control in Vietnam during the 19th century, combined with the decline and fall of the Chinese Empire, brought cataclysmic change to Vietnam. With ancient Confucian methods discredited, the search began for new ways to regain Vietnam's independence. The dominant Vietnamese leader of the twentieth century, Ho Chi Minh, embodied this search, and he seized the "opportune moment" to free Vietnam from French control at the close of World War II. He soon required the assistance of the Chinese communists, though, and pragmatically subordinated ancient rivalries with China to achieve the goals of independence and reunification.

After these achievements, however, Vietnam's strategic culture rapidly became ill-suited to its strategic environment. Notable was Vietnam's repudiation of China, including the renunciation in 1976 of Vietnamese recognition of China's claim to the South China Sea and reassertion of Vietnam's own historical claims.

Furthermore, emboldened by Soviet aid, Vietnam's strategic choices throughout the 1980's served to weaken her military and economic strength relative to China. One of these choices was focusing her resources on controlling Indochina, while China steadily increased her presence in and sovereignty over the Spratly Islands. Since the collapse of this benefactor, Vietnam is now more clearly aware of her strategic realities. Yet rather than adequately develop her navy and air force or withdraw her claims, Vietnam maintains a

belligerent stance vis-a-vis China, relying on a strategy of standing up to China and attracting other benefactors. Recent positive developments like obtaining U.S. recognition and joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), however, have not provided Vietnam with the benefaction or protection that she is counting on. In fact Vietnam serves as a buffer for her ASEAN partners between themselves and China; ASEAN is no collective security alliance; and Vietnam's South China Sea claims conflict with most of the other ASEAN states, decreasing the prospects of ASEAN solidarity. And despite a prominent intersection of their national interests - counter-balancing Chinese power and hegemonic ambitions - the United States and Vietnam each face strong domestic constraints to overt alliance.

A nation's strategic culture tends to persist; it is cataclysmic failure that tends to alter the strategic landscape. Vietnam's military success in reunifying the country served to reaffirm her leaders' belief in the viability of Vietnamese strategic culture. When she changed her strategy towards China - to an antagonistic stance - just after reunification in 1975-76, Vietnam's Soviet alliance prevented a truly cataclysmic clash with China. With high political and economic incentives making the claims of each intractable, China far more powerful, and Vietnam at this time quite on her own, three resolution possibilities come to mind. One is a military clash with China that changes the South China Sea status quo in fact; another is a change in political regimes that would take an adjusted South China Sea policy; and the last is that a benefactor might well arrive, enabling Vietnam's strategic culture to persist.

Despite current domestic constraints, the likeliest candidate for such a role - odd as it might sound to Americans who still think of Vietnam as an era in U.S. history, rather than a place or a people - is the United States, which today cautiously eyes China as its most problematic rival in the coming century. And if she were to ally herself in any sense with Vietnam to further her own goals, the United States would be best off understanding both Vietnam's strategic culture and the ancient Sino-Vietnamese relationship.

I. INTRODUCTION

This thesis attempts to answer the question: why does Vietnam stubbornly maintain claims in the South China Sea, in direct competition with China's claims, when her actual ability to defend those claims is severely deficient? I use the concept of "strategic culture" to explain how leaders' perceptions of a country's "historical lessons" can drive a nation to over-reach as Vietnam has in the South China Sea. (See Figure 1.) In Vietnam's case, the most relevant lessons are (1) that China perpetually desires and frequently attempts to dominate Vietnam, and that Vietnam has done better through resistance than appeasement;¹ and (2) that Vietnam has the ability to attract foreign benefactors that will help her balance against Chinese power and help her to achieve her own goals.²

Vietnam's strategic culture under its dominant leader of this century, Ho Chi Minh, produced victory and reunification for North Vietnam two decades ago, just six years after Ho's death. After these achievements, however, Vietnam's strategic culture rapidly became ill-suited to its strategic environment. In particular, Vietnam's behavior toward China became far more antagonistic and less diplomatic than one might expect from a much smaller and weaker neighbor. This dysfunctional strategic culture persisted until the decline and then collapse of the Soviet Union made it apparent to her leaders that Vietnam's strategy of dependence on the Soviet Union was not a viable one. Having in the intervening years laid

¹Richard K. Betts, "Vietnam's Strategic Predicament," *Survival: The IISS Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 3, Autumn 1995, p. 62.

²Lucian Pye, *Asian Power and Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 239-241.



Figure 1: Southeast Asia and Southern China (From Ref. Kamm, p. 20)

claim to the South China Sea, however, and become dependent on the financial resources it provides for legitimacy obliged Vietnam to chart a new course. The chief obstacle in the new course is that Vietnam's current regime still claims and needs large tracts of sea that it has not adequately prepared itself to defend.³ And backing down from those claims, or losing militarily in a defense of them, could have dramatic domestic consequences for the current Vietnamese regime.

This thesis examines how weak a position the Vietnamese regime has thus created for itself, as well as what options it has and is likely to take in attempting to deal with what Richard Betts has termed Vietnam's "strategic predicament."⁴ Vietnam's strategic culture created the predicament; it will also influence how she handles it.

The thesis examines how the United States, in pursuit of its own national interests, may deal with Vietnam's strategic situation, particularly in regard to future U.S. attempts to balance growing Chinese power and prevent Chinese regional hegemony in Southeast Asia. It is still politically unfeasible for the United States to back overtly a state that out-lived it in war two decades ago. Official U.S. policy at this time insists that the United States takes "no position" on the legality of the various claims to the South China Sea.⁵ The United States does have an articulated interest in maintaining freedom of navigation through the South China Sea, though, and an equally clear desire to prevent the emergence of an Asian regional

³Betts., p. 66.

⁴Ibid., p. 61.

⁵ "Policy Statement on the South China Sea," U.S. State Department, Washington, D.C., May 1995.

hegemon. With China gradually increasing its presence there, the South China Sea will become an increasingly visible arena of international interest, and control of it will be an issue on which the United States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Vietnam might share much common ground.

A. A SEA CALLED CHINA

1. Rival Claimants

Americans do not hear much news from the South China Sea; neither does the U.S. policy-making establishment yet pay an inordinate amount of attention to either the region or its problems.⁶ Yet it is an area in which the United States, China, Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, and many other nations each have compelling national interests. It is a desolate place, dominated by often shallow, dangerous waters, and marked only by hundreds of tiny, barely inhabitable islands, many of which are nothing more than rocky outcroppings that completely submerge at high tide.⁷ (See Figure 2.) Even so, six nations have competing territorial claims to all or parts of the region, with few claims being compellingly or clearly superior, in legal terms, to the others. And the South China Sea is not merely a *potential* flashpoint, but the site of actual sea battles between Vietnam and China in 1974 and 1988, shots exchanged between the two as recently as 1994, and countless lesser incidents between rival claimants.⁸

⁶Betts, p. 72.

⁷Mark G. Harstad, *South China Sea Reference Book*, U.S. Pacific Command, April 1996, p. 3.

⁸Mark J. Valencia, *China and the South China Sea Disputes*, Adelphi Paper 298 (London: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 8.

In a large maritime area rife with conflicts like this, one might surmise that the desires of the strongest regional and extra-regional powers with interests there, and in particular the powers with the most substantial naval and air forces, might reign supreme; that the smaller, weaker powers might be forced to compromise, and at less than favorable terms. For the

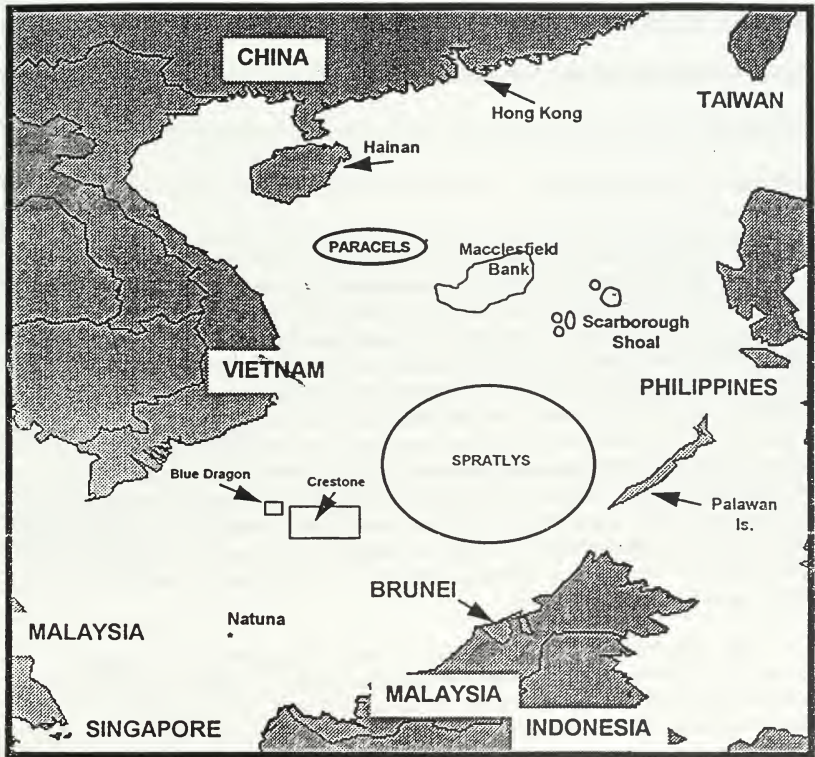


Figure 2: The South China Sea (From Ref. Harstad, p. 1)

most part this thinking does hold true. All but one of China's rival claimants recognize her as the dominant force in the region and pursue their claims in a non-belligerent fashion.⁹

The often belligerent exception is Vietnam, a province of China long ago and today a far smaller and weaker neighbor, rival, and sometime-protégé.¹⁰ Pointedly calling the disputed body of water "the Eastern Sea," Vietnam continues to claim most of the South China Sea. As justification, Vietnam cites her continental shelf, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, historical usage, and, somewhat ironically, inheritance of French claims from colonial days.¹¹

⁹China, Taiwan and Vietnam each essentially claim the South China Sea in its entirety, including the Paracel and Spratly island chains. The Philippines' claims partially overlap these in the eastern Spratlys, and in the wake of the January 1995 "Mischief Reef" incident she signed a bilateral protocol with China to handle future differences. Malaysia's claims conflict with China in the southwestern South China Sea. Brunei claims no islands, but simply maritime use of some areas. Indonesia, not included as a rival claimant in the literature on the subject, in recent years has been unsure of whether China lays claim to her valuable Natuna Islands at the southern extreme of the South China Sea. While Taiwan's claims mirror the People's Republic of China's, and though Taiwan has long controlled and stationed marines on the largest Spratly island, there has been largely unspoken Taiwan-PRC cooperation, rather than conflict, in the region. For a superb study of this entire issue, see Michael W. Studeman's *Dragon in the Shadows: Calculating China's Advances in the South China Sea*, Master's Thesis (Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School, August 1996).

¹⁰Not all agree with this description of Vietnam as belligerent; some observers point to Vietnam's November 1991 request for a closer security relationship with Beijing as an example of evidence to the contrary. However, absolutely no margin for compromise on her South China Sea positions accompanied that offer (and it was rejected by the Chinese). An example of belligerence occurred one year later, when the VCP invited members of the international press to tour its occupied Spratly islands just as Chinese Premier Li Peng was arriving in Hanoi for the first high-level visit between the two countries in over two decades. Valencia, p. 9.

¹¹Harstad, p. 10.

2. “The Eastern Sea”

A comparison of Vietnamese incentives and disincentives to pursue claims that conflict with China’s might suggest that it would be in Vietnam’s best interests to appease China, rather than stand up to her and continue to claim an area China has repeatedly called part of its sovereign territory.¹² After all, China is a far more powerful nation. While Vietnam has won some wars in this century, it is currently a vastly weakened state militarily from its peak strength at the time of China’s 1979 invasion of Vietnam. Since then the relative power balance has continued to move in China’s favor, particularly in the realms of air and sea power which are so vital to enforcing claims to so vast a maritime area as the South China Sea. Moreover, economically Vietnam is in no position even to begin to close the gap.¹³ One might expect that in this weak position, Vietnam would be cooperating and compromising with China. Instead Vietnam is adamant, and often belligerent, vis-a-vis China in maintaining her claims in the South China Sea.¹⁴ My intention is to use the concept of Vietnamese

¹²Recently and significantly, “China threw down the gauntlet on 25 February 1992 when it passed a law asserting sovereignty over the Spratly, Paracel and Senkaku Islands and other specks in the South China Sea, and warned it would defend them.” Mamdouh G. Salameh, “China, Oil and the Risk of Regional Conflict,” *Survival: The IISS Quarterly*, Winter 1995-96, Vol. 37, No. 4.

¹³Betts, pp. 67-68.

¹⁴William S. Turley, “Vietnamese Security in Domestic and Regional Focus: The Political-Economic Nexus,” eds. Richard J. Ellings and Sheldon W. Simon, *Southeast Asian Security in the New Millenium* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), pp. 188-90. The South China Sea is by no means the only area of dispute between Vietnam and the PRC. There is disagreement on the precise location of parts of their sizeable land border, and continuous struggle for prime influence over the rest of Indochina. The demarcation line in the Tonkin Gulf has long been an issue of contention, as well. My focus will be on the South China Sea, and in particular the Spratly Islands area, which the PRC claims but has not consolidated control over. Following Sun Tzu’s dictate that it is

strategic culture, and the imperatives it carries with it, to explain Vietnam's actions and policies in the South China Sea.¹⁵

B. WHAT IS AT STAKE IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

1. Vietnam's Incentives

The South China Sea is of vital importance to Vietnam in attempting to achieve its political and economic goals. For despite its barren appearance, there is treasure buried beneath the surface. The sale of the oil and natural gas that Vietnam removes from the floor of the South China Sea provides the government with over one-third of its export revenues and foreign exchange, a percentage the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) expects only to rise in the coming years. These assets have helped the Vietnamese economy to grow at world-class, near-double digit annual rates each of the past five years.¹⁶ The VCP has staked its legitimacy on improving the standard of living of its growing population. The South China

best to win without fighting at all, in the Spratlys China appears to be seeking to gain much territorially and economically at the lowest political and military cost.

¹⁵From its ancient history, Vietnam has learned that it pays to not back down. From its recent history, Vietnam has learned it can find benefactors to help it achieve its goals. And the Vietnamese Communist Party, by fashioning itself as the only legitimate guarantor of Vietnamese independence, security, and prosperity, has effectively limited its maneuvering room and eliminated some options that would otherwise be available to it. Because of the strategic culture they have nurtured in Vietnam, to take certain courses - such as renouncing Vietnam's claims in the South China Sea - would severely de-legitimize VCP rule. And continuing their lock on power appears to be the regime's highest goal. Clark D. Neher, *Southeast Asia in the New International Era* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), p. 199; Valencia, pp. 30-31; and Betts, pp. 73, 76.

¹⁶1995 *World Factbook*, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, DC, 1995; Kristin Huckshorn, "Leaders Debate Vietnam's Future," *The San Jose Mercury-News*, 29 October 1995, p. 18-A; Harish Mehta, "World Bank Plans More Vietnam Loans," *Business Times*, 13 March 1996; and "Asia Industry: Competition for Energy Resources to Intensify," *EIU Newswire*, 14 August 1996.

Sea resources are key to maintaining this growth rate and maintaining the government's "mandate of heaven."¹⁷ Vietnam's claims to the South China Sea, however, are in direct conflict with China's. One problematic result of this is found in the western part of the South China Sea, where in the 1990's China and Vietnam sold overlapping concessions to separate American oil companies. Naval forces on both sides have engaged in intimidation tactics, resulting in several incidents in the area.¹⁸

2. China's Incentives

China has a multitude of reasons to assert itself aggressively to back up its claims in the South China Sea. Like Vietnam's ruling party, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has largely staked its political legitimacy on economic growth, as well as on a nationalist, sovereignty-conscious ideology that has been steadily replacing that of communism.

Continued economic growth requires increased energy supplies. In November 1993 the People's Republic of China (PRC) became a net oil importer for the first time in decades, a fact that concerns the self-reliance-minded CCP rulers. These energy needs will only increase as economic growth rates, among the world's highest over the last decade, continue to climb, and as China's economy modernizes. Coal, with all the pollution it has brought to China, continues to meet some 80% of her energy needs. But as the number of people, cars

¹⁷D.R. SarDesai, *Vietnam: The Struggle for National Identity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), p. 128. SarDesai asserts that "the Spratly islands' worth is crucial to Vietnam's economic future." Mark Valencia agrees that the islands are of "great military and economic significance to Vietnam." Valencia, p. 30.

¹⁸Betts, pp. 71-72; Turley, "Vietnamese Security," pp. 189-90.

and planes in China continues to skyrocket, demand for oil will continue to increase dramatically.¹⁹

Very significant incentives are the issues of sovereignty and avoiding internal chaos.²⁰ After “standing China up” following a “century of shame,” these remain the primary concerns of China’s rulers as they strive to maintain their lock on power.²¹ While China may at times become preoccupied with internal unity and security, aggressive movement in the South China Sea is compatible with this focus. Even during times when China must focus on internal security, her large police forces, militia, and ground forces are adequate to handle such matters. This leaves the PLA Navy and Air Force free for other matters, like demonstrating their usefulness and justifying their modernization and build-up costs.²² A logical place for them to do just that has been, and will continue to be, the South China Sea. A campaign against Vietnam could also serve domestic political purposes as a nationalist, sovereignty-defending rallying point, and could be a campaign in which Chinese on each side of the Taiwan Strait not only agreed but actually cooperated.²³ Finally, having publicly and

¹⁹ “Asia Industry: Competition for Energy Resources,” *EIU Newswire*; and Salameh, p. 141.

²⁰ Admiral Joseph Prueher, Commander in Chief of the United States Pacific Command, believes that the CCP has no two bigger issues than these. Superintendent’s Guest Lecture at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, 6 November 1996.

²¹ Jianwei Wang, “Coping with China as a Rising Power,” ed. James Shinn, *Weaving the Net* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1996), p. 164.

²² Valencia, p. 16.

²³ According to Mark Valencia, “Taiwan continues to encourage and support China in its expansive claims Taiwan seems to want to band together against the other claimants.” He also points out that as recently as May 1995, Taiwanese military forces

repeatedly claimed sovereignty over the South China Sea, the CCP must demonstrate to internal and external audiences alike that her claims of sovereignty are not subject to negotiation.²⁴

3. China's Disincentives Dismissed; Vietnam's Confirmed

Two of the most common arguments against the PRC's likelihood of using "significant force" or "engaging in prolonged conflict" in the South China Sea²⁵ are the claims that (1) economic interdependence - the PRC's continuous need for ever-growing amounts

have fired on Vietnamese vessels. Valencia, pp. 39, 41. A combined PRC / Taiwanese armed force would indeed be impressive, though not very foreseeable at this time. Cooperation, however, could be far more subtle. For instance, in the event the PRC faced any economic sanctions following aggressive military action in the South China Sea, Taiwan could be a silent conduit for continued trade into and out of the PRC. The PRC's ban on direct cross-strait travel is now in the process of changing, driven in part by the imminent return of Hong Kong to Chinese rule and the consequent elimination of it as the "neutral" stopping point for goods and people.

²⁴Xu Xiaojun, "China's Grand Strategy for the 21st Century," ed. Michael D. Bellows, *Asia in the 21st Century: Evolving Strategic Priorities* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1989), pp. 21-41.

²⁵In an article intended to dismiss concerns about the likelihood of Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, Samuel S.G. Wu and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita caveat their findings with these two phrases. They limit their prediction to "the near future," although they define this as less than five years. They also find a "dramatic increase in military expenditures and a significant strengthening of China's naval force in the South China Sea," as well as a likelihood that, "if challenged, China's response will be a little bit more aggressive in the near future than it has been recently." Wu and de Mesquita, "Assessing the Dispute in the South China Sea: A Model of China's Security Decision Making," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 38, 1994, pp. 379, 398-399. Another scholar, Michael Gallagher, cautions that "fears of a looming conflict over the Spratly Islands may be premature." Yet he soon paradoxically points out that "China's claims to the Spratlys are easier to understand when one realizes that the Chinese regard control of the ocean's resources as vital to their nation's continued existence," and he notes "China's willingness to use force to compel recognition of its rights" in the South China Sea since 1974. Michael Gallagher, "China's Illusory Threat to the South China Sea," *International Security*, Summer 1994, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 170, 172.

of aid and trade - will inhibit her risking economic sanctions by using force, and that (2) diplomatic pressures by ASEAN on China will result in negotiation, rather than force, settling the disputes in the South China Sea. Both of these arguments have flaws which make them unlikely to inhibit Chinese expansionism.

China's intrinsic economic strength and trade ties will enable it to weather any economic sanctions imposed on her. Many countries surrounding China - including Russia, the Koreas, Thailand, Burma, Pakistan, and Taiwan - are unlikely to follow calls for sanctions against China; each instead could easily serve as conduits for continued Chinese trade. Nor would sanctions, if imposed, be likely to last for long; the world simply cannot ignore China's enormous market. Japan, for instance, was the quickest to resume normal trade in ending the post-Tiananmen sanctions, and the United States soon followed. Each has become accustomed to the China trade; interdependency cuts both ways. Essentially,

because China is such a large country, the the impact of economic integration [in restraining China] should never be overestimated. It will be slow to be felt and in most cases will be reversible. Often it can be a double-edged sword, creating stakes as well as leverage. More important, the Chinese leadership still puts regime survival and national sovereignty above everything else. As Chinese leaders are fond of saying, China can survive without most-favored-nation status and other social and economic relations with the West, if necessary.²⁶

The belief that ASEAN diplomatic pressure will effectively reverse Chinese claims of sovereignty is also unfounded and overly optimistic.²⁷ ASEAN is not a collective security

²⁶Wang, p. 164.

²⁷Leszek Buszynski, "Southeast Asia in the Post-Cold War Era: Regionalism and Security," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 32, No. 9, September 1992, pp. 834-35; and Turley,

organization and is nowhere close to becoming one; potential threats do not move it to action. The group tends to only come together on security matters *after* a direct regional threat has become manifest, and even then its “action” largely consists of putting out a joint statement. Even ex post facto action would come too late to help Vietnam, the likeliest first victim of Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. Though not articulated, Vietnam in fact serves as something of a “buffer” state between fellow ASEAN states and the PRC.²⁸ The other ASEAN claimant nations also have conflicting South China Sea claims with Vietnam themselves, and ASEAN states, out of self-interest, often guard their words concerning China. An oft-mentioned example of cooperative ASEAN security-mindedness was the organization’s condemnation of Vietnam’s 1978 invasion and subsequent decade-long occupation of Cambodia.²⁹ Often ignored is the fact that this was an extremely easy position for ASEAN to take since the PRC and the United States were on the same side of the issue as ASEAN.³⁰

In any case, no precedent exists which hints that the PRC would even *need* to use “significant force” or to “engage in prolonged conflict” to assert her claims in the South China

“Vietnamese Security,” p. 185.

²⁸Turley, “Vietnamese Security,” p. 175.

²⁹Bilson Kurus, “Understanding ASEAN: Benefits and Raison d’Etre,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 33, No. 8, August 1993, p. 821.

³⁰Michael Leifer, “Vietnam’s Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Coping with Vulnerability,” ed. Sheldon W. Simon, *East Asia in Transition* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), p. 271; Amita Acharya, “ASEAN and Conditional Engagement,” ed. James Shinn, *Weaving the Net* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1996), pp. 221-224; and Betts, p. 74.

Sea. Over the past 23 years China has significantly extended her footprint there, and often at no or low military cost.³¹ Starting with zero presence in the region at the beginning of 1974, China has since taken the Paracel Islands from Vietnam, occupied a large number of islands in the Spratlys, and made herself the primary actor in the South China Sea. Today the PLA mans outposts as far away as 600 miles from Hainan Island, China's southernmost province, and PLA Navy ships patrol the region continuously.³² China's expansion efforts have usually come at minimal cost in men or materiel. As recently as the Mischief Reef controversy in January 1995, for instance, no shots were fired as China extended her presence further south. When China has utilized force, it has been of extremely short duration. That fact, combined with the remoteness of the area, enables China to achieve her aims before news of her activities reaches the outside world.³³

³¹Bruce Cumings, "The World Shakes China," *The National Interest*, No. 43, Spring 1996, p. 40.

³²In January 1974, PRC forces defeated South Vietnamese forces in a battle for the Paracels. Another significant sea battle against Vietnam took place in March 1988; three Vietnamese ships were sunk and 72 of her sailors killed. As it moved south over the past two decades, the PLA learned of its shortcomings in providing air cover to its naval forces and worked to eliminate that weakness. In doing so the PLA increased its air power based on Hainan Island; constructed a sizeable airfield on Woody Island, one of the Paracels; imported long-range fighter-bombers and aerial refueling technology; and is working to obtain a French aircraft carrier. It also has significantly improved its own vessels' anti-aircraft missile capabilities. Nayan Chanda, "No-Cash Carrier: France may be buckling on Chinese arms embargo," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 October 1996, p. 20; Edward Friedman, *National Identity and Democratic Prospects in Socialist China* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), pp. 128-29; and Valencia, p. 17.

³³The remoteness and inhabitability of the Spratlys work to China's advantage in her expansion efforts. China could change the status quo of ownership rather quickly and silently. Because there are no peoples to be subjugated, expansion there can easily be seen as an essentially "victimless crime" - with no human rights questions to deal with from the West, or for the West to use as leverage against China. As long as China assured the

Chinese disincentives to exercise her claims in the South China Sea are not overly inhibitive. China's incentives on balance outweigh her disincentives to control the resources of the Spratlys and the rest of the South China Sea. Conversely, it seems that Vietnam - far weaker, and lacking any alliances - would do best to recognize not only China's powerful political and economic motivations to one day exercise true sovereignty over her claims, but also China's overwhelmingly superior military and economic ability to fulfill her motivations.³⁴

Rather than continuing to hope for the best - that others will come to her aid and that negotiations will resolve her differences with China - it would be best for Vietnam to assume a worst-case scenario: that China's participation in negotiations over the region is simply a stalling device while she develops a blue-water navy;³⁵ that diplomatic pressure or outright assistance from ASEAN, the United States, or any other external entity will be neither effective nor forthcoming; and that China will engage Vietnam militarily to enforce her claims over the Spratlys if Vietnam does not detour from her own claims to sovereignty there. Vietnam's strategic culture, however, effectively works against such a change in strategy from occurring.

United States and her allies, even only privately, that freedom of navigation would not be impeded, the American government might be hard-pressed to get her public very excited about who actually "owned the rocks" in a sea many could not find on a map. Similarly, Vietnam's communist government and military would be unlikely to evoke much sympathy from Western governments or publics.

³⁴Friedman, p. 143. Friedman notes that "China increasingly has a capacity to project power," and that "since the 1973 global oil crisis, China has been expanding its navy and its offshore territorial claims with an eye on oil."

³⁵Achaya, p. 220.

C. STRATEGIC CULTURE

1. The Concept of Strategic Culture

The concept of strategic culture is useful in explaining Vietnamese claims and actions in the South China Sea. Kenneth Booth has argued that strategic culture represents “the aggregation of the attitudes and patterns of behavior of the most influential voices: these may be, depending on the nation, the political elite, the military establishment, and / or public opinion.” These attitudes and behavior patterns are largely based on leaders’ understanding of their nation’s historical experiences, which significantly shape national strategies and thus foreign policies. Booth suggests that the primary characteristic of strategic culture is its persistence over time, tending to “outlast all but major changes in military technology, domestic arrangements, or the international environment,” and he argues that understanding strategic culture is “a fundamental part of ‘knowing thine enemy.’”³⁶ With leaders tending to make decisions based on the “lessons” they draw from their nation’s past experiences, the hope is that an understanding of a nation’s strategic culture will help us to anticipate her leaders’ decisions in given situations.

Vietnamese history, ancient or modern, cannot be told without continual reference to China. Their relationship so often resembles that of siblings, including both rivalry and indulgence, and in such a relationship “rational action” is often not what is found. This is why it is vital to consider her strategic culture when trying to understand or predict Vietnamese actions vis-a-vis China.

³⁶Kenneth Booth, “The Concept of Strategic Culture Affirmed,” in Carl G. Jacobsen, ed., *Strategic Power: USA/USSR* (London: MacMillan, 1990), pp. 121, 125.

2. Changing a Strategic Culture: Cataclysm Required?

If they are so persistent over time, how do strategic cultures change? Jack Snyder argues that they do not change easily, noting that “once a distinctive approach to strategy takes hold, it tends to continue . . . through processes of socialization and institutionalization . . . despite changes in the circumstances that gave rise to it.”³⁷ Alastair Johnston supports this nod to the past with his assertion that a state’s “strategic preferences are rooted in the ‘early’ or ‘formative’ military experiences of the state.”³⁸ And Stephen Krasner explains that states tend to persist in their strategic cultures until “some cataclysmic external event” brings policies, and the strategic culture that creates them, more in line with the state’s actual interests. The state then follows the new policies “until a new crisis demonstrates that they are no longer feasible. States become locked in by the impact of prior choices.”³⁹ Strategic culture is substantially adjusted only after events dramatically prove it ineffective.

There are skeptics about the utility of this concept, including to some extent Snyder himself, who warned that ascribing state actions to cultural influences should be an “explanation of the last resort . . . to be used when all else fails.” But he admits that the concept is undeniably useful when observing “distinct approaches in the face of disconfirming

³⁷Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*, RAND R-2154 (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1977), p. v.

³⁸Alastair Iain Johnston, “Thinking About Strategic Culture,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 4., Spring 1995, p. 34.

³⁹Stephen D. Krasner, “State Power and the Structure of International Trade,” in *World Politics*, No. 3, April 1976.

evidence, as well as distinctive patterns . . . coloured by pre-existing institutions and ideas.”⁴⁰ I have found the strategic culture concept useful in analyzing and explaining Vietnamese behavior vis-a-vis China.

3. Characteristics of Vietnamese Strategic Culture

Just as Vietnam’s history could not be written without reference to China, Vietnam’s strategic culture has been shaped by her proximity to an overshadowing China. Vietnam’s strategic culture is still marked by sometimes conflicting desires regarding China: to seek and receive help from China, but also to resist undue Chinese influence or domination. Another element of strategic culture evident through Vietnam’s history is the frequent use of foreign protectors. Even China has been sought as the protector; at other times China was the reason Vietnam sought protection; and sometimes each was the case simultaneously. Additionally, the Vietnamese at times have displayed an ability to band together, and to band with external protectors, to defeat a foe (often China). But Vietnam has just as often displayed factionalism that has made her vulnerable to foreign domination.⁴¹ Furthermore, Vietnam has not been immune to taking advantage of her own weaker neighbors; throughout her history Vietnam has grown dramatically in physical size. Yet expansion also has diluted the cohesiveness of her people and her national strategies. Today’s Vietnamese claims to the South China Sea -

⁴⁰Jack Snyder, “The Concept of Strategic Culture: Caveat Emptor,” in Carl G. Jacobsen, ed., *Strategic Power: USA/USSR* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 4.

⁴¹David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885 - 1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) pp. 21, 24; and Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 103.

an area several times larger than the Vietnamese land mass - can be seen as a modern extension of this tendency to overreach.⁴²

4. Strategic Culture: Both Cause and Effect

A characteristic of strategic culture is that it functions as both a cause (independent variable) and effect (dependent variable). Because of this characteristic, a chronological approach best suits analysis of strategic culture. In Vietnam's case, for example, strategic culture early in this century is best analyzed as a dependent variable since it was changing dramatically in conjunction with the cataclysmic changes occurring in Vietnamese society. Later in the twentieth century, though, Vietnam's transformed strategic culture is best analyzed as an independent variable. Under Ho Chi Minh's leadership Vietnam's strategic culture was a relatively constant causal factor bringing dramatic political change to Vietnam. After Ho's death (in 1969) it remained constant under his long-time protege Pham Van Dong's leadership until reunification in 1976. Following reunification, however, one important element disappeared - a pragmatic policy of "appeasement" toward China. This strategic culture was enabled for a decade and a half by Soviet aid, a near-term blessing that would prove disastrous for Vietnam in the longer term.

⁴²According to William Duiker, "In the pre-colonial era, the thrust of Vietnamese expansionism to the south and west was one of the most dynamic political forces in Southeast Asia." He asserts that the increased tensions between China and Vietnam after Vietnamese reunification represented "the resumption of a historical process that had been temporarily submerged during the colonial period and the Vietnam War." William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981), p. 339.

D. ORGANIZATION OF THE THESIS

Chapters II and III explore the dependent variable side of Vietnamese strategic culture, examining the origins and primary influences on its development. Chapter II focuses on Vietnam's ancient and complicated relationship with China, as well as the influence of factors such as geography, Vietnam's own expansionism, and the history of internal divisiveness. Chapter III examines the influences of the past two centuries, focusing on the modern aspect of Vietnamese strategic culture of seeking and utilizing external aid to accomplish her objectives, and the consequences of dependence on benefactors.

Chapter IV examines post-reunification Vietnamese strategic culture in its role as independent variable. This chapter examines several modern cases where her strategic culture has worked to Vietnam's detriment. Of particular interest is how Vietnam's strategic culture has been a causal factor in her taking and maintaining belligerent positions vis-a-vis China in the South China Sea that do not correspond with her actual ability to protect her position and interests there. The thesis concludes with a discussion of how Vietnam's strategic culture might influence events in the South China Sea, what might be required for her strategic culture to change, and how the United States may figure into such developments.

II. ANCIENT ORIGINS OF VIETNAMESE STRATEGIC CULTURE

The purpose of this chapter is to identify and understand the traditional sources of and influences on Vietnamese strategic culture. Much of Vietnam's history is defined by the changes in its relationship with China, and little of the history goes unrecalled. At times Vietnam has been a Chinese province, at other times an independent entity and a victor over Chinese armies. In either case, the potential or reality of Chinese domination has been the primary force shaping Vietnam's strategic culture for millenia, and it still is today.

A. HISTORY SHAPES STRATEGIC CULTURE

Without a doubt it is Vietnam's long, complicated relationship with China that has influenced her strategic culture more than any other factor. The relationship itself is a result of both the inescapable nature of geography and the vast and timeless disparity in size, population, and power between the two nations. (See Figure 3.)

When analyzing international relations with the intent to predict and plan for the future, analysts sometimes overlook the significance of history. In the case of Sino-Vietnamese relations, however, history's relevance is indisputable. Memories go back a long way, and even ancient ones contribute to shaping today's strategic cultures. The leaders of the ruling parties of both nations themselves refer quite frequently to the significance of the past, including citing "historical usage" as the prime justification for why the islands of the South China Sea are "theirs."⁴³ It is important to note that historical accuracy is by no means

⁴³Harstad, pp. 7-10.

critical to their claims. As David Marr has pointed out, “to exclude all apparent myth . . . is to ignore the fact that myths have a way of affecting later events.”⁴⁴ The Vietnamese people’s perceptions of Sino-Vietnamese history shape the VCP’s approach in dealing with disagreements with the Chinese communists, just as the VCP attempts to manipulate and exploit the historical perceptions of its own people. In the end it really makes no difference

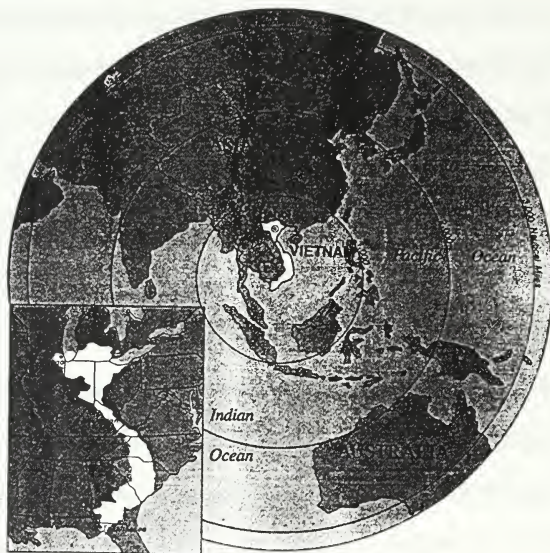


Figure 3: Vietnam’s Place in Asia, Size Comparison (From Ref. Cima, et al., p. xxiii)

⁴⁴Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, p. xviii.

which Vietnamese beliefs about China's past actions or current intentions are factual and which are myth. What is perceived and believed, not necessarily what is true, is what matters: this is the key influence in shaping strategic culture.⁴⁵

A people's common history is the glue of nationalism, and anti-Chinese sentiment has been a strong and time-honored force in forging Vietnam's history. Even during the heyday of Vietnamese communism it is safe to say that communist / internationalist concerns never overrode nationalist concerns.⁴⁶ With communism now more a moniker than a method of government, and with dispute over ownership of the South China Sea pitting the two communist nations against each other, nationalism in Vietnam and China alike has become the lowest common denominator in marshalling public opinion. It is thus likely that the invokers of history and nationalistic propaganda have busy days ahead in Vietnam, making it apparent once again how much history matters there.

B. LIVING IN THE SHADOW OF CHINA

Vietnam's history, like most of its various names through history, has been shaped by its location on China's southern border. One appellation, Annam, sprang from the Chinese for "Pacified South."⁴⁷ This was perhaps a case of "wishful thinking" on China's part, since

⁴⁵David Shambaugh points out that "international relations theorists since Thucydides have noted the critical importance of perceptions (at both the elite and mass levels) in influencing nations' foreign policies." David Shambaugh, *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 3.

⁴⁶George C. Herring, *America's Longest War* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), Chapter One; and SarDesai, p. 125.

⁴⁷Ronald Cima, et. al. *Vietnam: A Country Study* (Washington: U.S. Army, 1989) p. 12.

China's millenium of direct rule over Vietnam was filled with rebellions. Because their geographic proximity and disproportionate sizes will never change, China will never cease to be the critical factor for Vietnam's leaders to consider in all realms of decision-making.

1. Early Legends and History

Homo sapiens were probably in what is now Vietnam by 50,000 BC, and the Red River delta was settled by the second millenium BC.⁴⁸ While "it is difficult to be precise about the people and history"⁴⁹ of Vietnam, what is certain is that "the genetic pool was . . . affected by various intruding groups."⁵⁰ Intrusion has been something of a constant theme throughout Vietnam's history. Vietnam has intruded on others, as in her conquest of the ancient Cham and Khmer civilizations in the mid-15th and mid-18th centuries, respectively. Just as often, though, Vietnam herself has been intruded on by others, including Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, French, Japanese, and Americans.

While each intruder in time left or, more often than not, was forced out of Vietnam, various influences from their stays remained. But the combined effects of the others pale in comparison to the Chinese influence on Vietnam. In fact, Vietnam's recorded history only begins with its first mention in Chinese annals in 208 BC, on the occasion of a Chinese general conquering the Viet people of Au Lac, the earliest known embodiment of Vietnam.⁵¹

⁴⁸Oscar Chapuis, *A History of Vietnam, From Hong Bang to Tu Duc* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995), pp. 5-6.

⁴⁹Gordon T. Bowles, *The People of Asia* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), p. 189.

⁵⁰Chapuis, p. 4.

⁵¹Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 111.

2. Borrowed History and Heroes

Before they began to assemble their own recorded history and legends, “Chinese history and heroes, its kings and emperors, served as role models for Vietnamese scholars.” Vietnam’s own myths, once in place, held that almost three millenia BC the Vietnamese sprang from a seafaring father of the dragon race. He was a direct descendant, though a respectful five generations down the line, of a mythical Chinese emperor, while the mother was an immortal Chinese mountain princess. After having 100 sons together, it is said that the father decided, significantly, that those of the dragon and immortal lines were “different breeds and cannot remain together long,” and so he left her. Also significant is that the mother tried to return to China with her sons but did not get far before being stopped by the Chinese emperor.⁵²

According to the legend, the “Hundred Vietnamese” (*Pai Yueh*) then dispersed throughout the land. Fifty crossed the mountains into southern China, while fifty moved southward to the sea. The bravest of the sons founded the kingdom of Van Lang in the northern half of what is now Vietnam, beginning a mythic dynasty which would cover two and a half millenia of unrecorded Vietnamese history. The kingdom and the dynasty came to their ends in 257 BC at the hands of a rival northern Vietnamese group, the Au Viet, who then founded the kingdom of Au Lac.⁵³ This is an early example of another dominant theme in Vietnamese history - internal divisiveness. Although difficult to prove, I would argue that

⁵²Chapuis, pp. 10-13.

⁵³Ibid.

the idea of the “Hundred Vietnamese” - dispersed between lowland and mountain, and between Vietnam and southern China - is almost certainly a retrospective attempt to explain and account for this recurrent and problematic theme.

The Au Lac kingdom did not last long, for it was destined to be the first recorded incarnation of Vietnam to lose its freedom to China. The defeat was inflicted in 208-207 BC by Zhao Tuo (Trieu Da in Vietnamese), an army general of the mighty Ch’in dynasty, whose founding emperor recently had unified China. The First Emperor dispatched the general to conquer Au Lac for China, but Trieu Da “decided to keep the country for himself. Hence, Vietnam’s annexation [by China] was delayed, but its fate was sealed.” And, almost certainly not accidentally, legend has it that treachery, not military skill, brought the renegade Chinese general his victory.⁵⁴

Trieu Da proclaimed himself both king of what he called “Nan Yueh” (Nam Viet) as well as “Great Chief of the Man Yi” (barbarians) to distinguish his kingdom from the Ch’in empire. By all accounts he did not attempt to “sinicize” Vietnam but rather embraced its culture, forsaking Chinese culture and even killing officials appointed by the central Chinese government in his quest for independence and distinctness. Straddling the modern border between the two nations, Trieu Da’s kingdom was a combination of Chinese and Vietnamese ethnicities. (See Figure 4.) He encouraged the continuance of local customs and intermarriage between Chinese and Vietnamese, and preserved the Vietnamese aristocracy. This latter action, while perhaps benevolent, created a “duplication of classes . . . at the top

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 20.

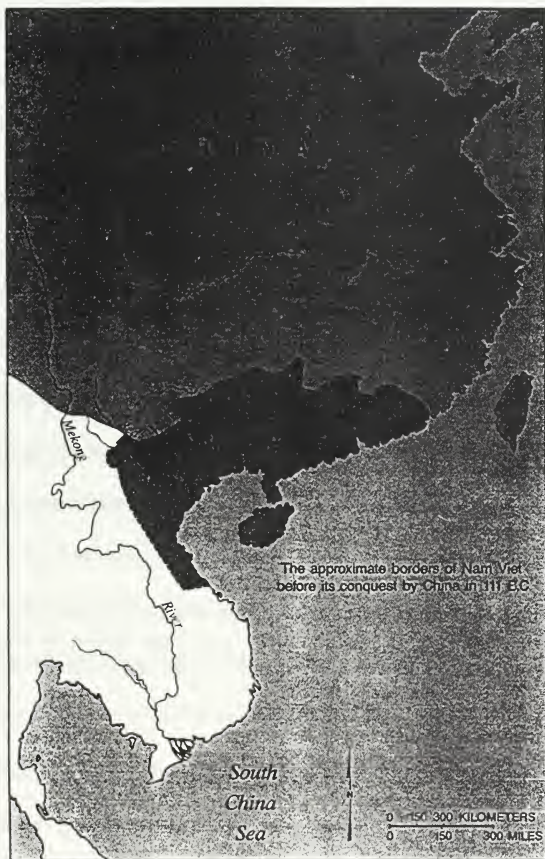


Figure 4: Nam Viet Before Conquest by China in 111 BC (From Ref. Cima, et al., p. 10)

level of Vietnamese society” and led to “internal Sino-Vietnamese antagonism among the elite.”⁵⁵ This represented just one more internal division in Vietnamese society, joining traditional antagonisms between lowlanders and highlanders, elites and peasants.

C. SINICIZATION AND RESISTANCE: DIRECT CHINESE RULE

1. The Southernmost Chinese Province: 111 BC to AD 939

After a century of Chinese tolerance of its independent existence, an expansion-minded Ch'in emperor sent forces against Nam Viet in 111 BC, conquered it, and declared it Giao Chi province, the southernmost of the Chinese empire. While the Vietnamese had been exposed to some Chinese culture under the rule of Trieu Da and his successors, under direct Chinese rule there were more deliberate attempts to sinicize the populace. Even more thorough sinicization was accomplished incidentally, however, in the opening decades of the first millennium, when large numbers of refugee Chinese elites who had fallen out of favor with a usurper to the Ch'in throne

poured into the Red River Delta. These were not needy peasants but well-accomplished scholars and officials who . . . became agents of intensive propagation of Chinese culture through the introduction of Chinese classics, Confucian ethics, and Chinese ideographs.⁵⁶

This mandarin class largely replaced Vietnamese officials in controlling land, industry, and government, and thus it is not surprising that much resistance to the sinicization of Vietnam was led by members of the displaced Vietnamese elite.

⁵⁵SarDesai, p. 10; and Chapuis, pp. xviii and 21.

⁵⁶SarDesai., p. 11.

2. Resistance to China Deified: The Trung Sisters

The earliest recorded and most celebrated case of resistance was the uprising of the Trung Sisters. Trung Trac was the wife of a powerful Vietnamese official who is said to have been executed on orders of the Chinese governor for his strenuous resistance to China's policy of acculturation. She and her sister Trung Nhi raised troops - successfully mobilizing the nobility and peasantry alike - and led a rebellion in AD 39 that succeeded the next year in pushing the Chinese out of Nam Viet. The Trungs then ruled Nam Viet for two years, until Chinese armies returned and crushed the resistance. The martyred sisters, who committed suicide as Nam Viet fell back under Chinese control, were later deified, and their exploits are still celebrated annually in Vietnam.⁵⁷ Their legend, perhaps as much as any other, continues to "inspire Vietnamese resistance to alien domination."⁵⁸

The Trung Sisters' revolt and brief rule, however, was followed by an even more brutal effort to subdue and sinicize the populace. While successful in that Chinese rule lasted another nine centuries afterward and the Vietnamese culture was indeed "Confucianized," Vietnam's elites and peasants still maintained many of their own cultural traditions.⁵⁹ This was perhaps because, as seen so often later during the days of European imperialism, no matter how much the colonized acculturated themselves they were never treated as equals to the colonizers. And while there was always a percentage of willing converts to Chinese rule

⁵⁷Cima, pp. 8-9.

⁵⁸SarDesai, p. 12.

⁵⁹Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, p. 10.

and sinic culture, “collaborators were far fewer than those who consistently hated the Chinese rule and spared no opportunity to demonstrate the sentiment.”⁶⁰

3. Continuous Resistance to Chinese Rule

Rebellions flourished throughout the millenium of Chinese rule, sparked at different times by peasants and elites alike. After the Trung Sisters’ rebellion, notable uprisings occurred in AD 160, 178, and 187, with the latter resulting in virtual independence from China for almost forty years. And a nineteen-year-old woman, Ba Trieu, remembered as “the Vietnamese version of Joan of Arc,” led a revolt against China in AD 248 that eventually ended in her defeat and suicide. She is remembered for her defiant words, which included a vow to “rail against the wind and the tide”⁶¹ to achieve her goals. The comparison of her oppressors to these powerful forces of nature is a testament to Vietnamese perceptions of China’s power relative to her own. Ba Trieu’s desire to fight these forces anyway, despite her knowledge of their near-invincibility, remains a classic, and oft-evoked, example of Vietnamese strategic culture.

Over the next seven centuries there were countless more rebellions, including several brief periods of self-rule before Chinese armies returned. Watching the rises and falls of Chinese dynasties and power, the Vietnamese would revolt when they sensed that China’s central government was too weak to stop them. It was not until the 10th century, however, that a Vietnamese general, Ngo Quyen, “truly ended the thousand-year Chinese rule.” And

⁶⁰SarDesai, p. 13.

⁶¹Karnow, p. 112.

the power and inertia of strategic culture, even in the face of dramatic change, is evident in the change in rulership of Vietnam. For once in charge of Vietnam's destiny, her indigenous leaders failed to make significant governmental changes for about a century. Instead they emulated Chinese rule and maintained a tributary relationship with China.⁶² With so many previous false starts at independence, though, and so little exposure to other systems, Vietnam's maintenance of its strategic culture, including its role in the sinic system, was perhaps inevitable at this point in her history.

D. A VASSAL'S INDEPENDENCE: 939 to 1885

1. Staying in the Sinic Realm

Vietnam took advantage of the weakness of China to break away in 939 AD. The opportunity came during the chaotic decades that followed the fall of the Tang Dynasty in 907, which left China heavily divided throughout much of the 10th century. After ruling for only five years until his death in 944, Ngo Quyen's new dynasty in Vietnam similarly gave way to a state of confusion.

By 965, "Vietnam was sinking into total anarchy," with twelve warlords dividing and ruling the country. Vietnam was reunited in 968 under Emperor Dinh Bo Linh, who established independent Vietnam's tributary or vassal relationship with the newly consolidated China. D.R. SarDesai has pointed out that this "political expediency . . . did not really diminish independence except in a legal, formalistic sense," while offering the benefit of

⁶²SarDesai, pp. 12, 15, 19, 21.

appeal to China for help in time of need.⁶³ The ancient tributary system, centered on China, was

founded on a concept foreign to (Western) traditions and ideas: that China, the most ancient, the largest, and the most developed political entity of East Asia - the known world of the ancient peoples of this region - was *ipso facto* the leader, the lawgiver, the source of art and culture for all within her orbit. Those who were nearest were therefore expected to conform more closely, as was the case with Vietnam There could be no equal to the Emperor of China; he was the only truly sovereign ruler in the world.⁶⁴

SarDesai argues that Dinh Bo Linh entered Vietnam into the vassal relationship with China for several reasons, one of which was to deter potential enemies from attacking. Another reason he offers is that the tributary relationship with China, while providing Vietnam with a protector, did not prevent Vietnam from having vassals of her own among the Khmers, the Chams, and others. But the last of SarDesai's reasons, based essentially on institutional and intellectual inertia, is the most intriguing. He asserts that the long era of Chinese rule had created a Chinese-Vietnamese elite that "perceived its vested interests to be more secure within the Chinese political system to which they were by then accustomed than in a completely independent monarchy without any links whatever with the Chinese Empire."⁶⁵ This phenomenon speaks once again to the staying power of a strategic culture long after the strategic calculus has changed. Vietnam's continuation of the tributary relationship with

⁶³Chapuis, pp. 20-21, 70.

⁶⁴C.P FitzGerald, *China and Southeast Asia Since 1945* (Camberwell, Australia: Longman, Ltd., 1973), p. 3.

⁶⁵SarDesai, pp. 19-20, 23.

China - a China now in the hands of the Mongols - after victory over the Mongols exemplifies the powerful momentum generated by an established and successful strategic culture.

2. Repelling the Mongols' Southern Advances

Vietnam's long-sought independence was dramatically affirmed by not just one but two impressive 13th-century repulsions of Mongol invaders, a feat few nations could claim. Because the Mongols came to rule China, "these exploits are recounted as among the most celebrated in the valiant annals in the Vietnamese history of resistance against China."⁶⁶ To defeat the second Mongol invasion in the 1280's, Vietnam worked closely with her own southern neighbor, the kingdom of Champa. That alliance soon dissolved, and the two kingdoms fought each other through much of the next century. After the Chams aided China in her conquest of Vietnam in the early 15th century, Vietnam set her sights on acquiring Champa - essentially today's central Vietnam - for herself.

3. Vietnam's Southern Advance: Origins of Division

The Vietnamese were successful in their own attempt at southern expansion, as the Chams essentially were wiped out by 1471. (See Figure 5.) This expansion, like Vietnam's 18th century expansion into the Khmer-ruled Mekong delta, helped solve some food and land scarcity problems for Vietnam. Expansion also contributed to a significant new problem, however: a palpable divisiveness between northerners and southerners that soon produced competing dynasties and lengthy civil wars. Even today, two decades after national reunification, a stark division remains, and it is a division that can be explained in terms of

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 23.

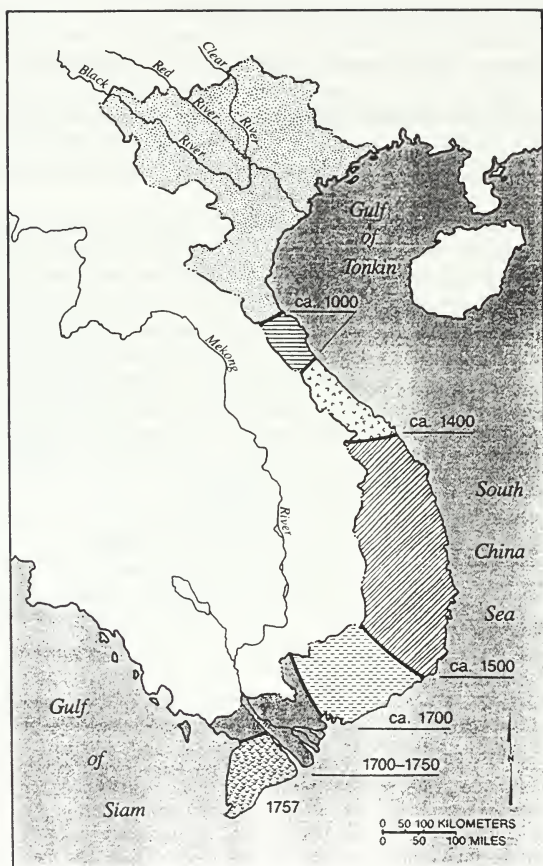


Figure 5: Vietnam's Southern Expansion, AD 1000-1757 (Ref. Cima, et. al., p. 22)

strategic culture. Whereas traditional (northern) Vietnamese strategic culture could be chiefly explained by her immediate proximity to China and constant worry of interference or invasion, “the Vietnamese who moved southward into lands formerly occupied by the Cham and the Khmer became less concerned about the threat from China.”⁶⁷ Centered on the Red River and Mekong deltas, a thousand miles apart, and connected only by a narrow, difficult-to-travel strip of land, it seems quite reasonable that the northern and southern regions had and have conflicting priorities and strategic outlooks.

4. Chinese Rule Redux and Foreshadowing of Future Conflicts

Vietnam would continue to send triennial tribute to the Chinese emperor until she lost her independence to France late in the 19th century. But until the French conquest, Vietnam was de facto independent for almost a millenium, save for a two-decade-long return to Chinese rule early in the 15th century. This interruption by Ming Dynasty China was characterized by its pronounced and intensive attempt to sinicize Vietnam, which “naturally provoked the Vietnamese spirit of nationalism and age-old hostility against China.”⁶⁸ Once again, though, Vietnamese divisiveness was a contributing factor to a painful chapter in its own history. Some Vietnamese landholders, unhappy with a Vietnamese emperor bent on land reform, actually requested the Ming to intervene in Vietnam’s affairs. This gave China’s rulers the pretext on which to enter and conquer Vietnam once again in 1407.⁶⁹

⁶⁷Cima, p. 19.

⁶⁸SarDesai, p. 25.

⁶⁹Cima, p. 17; and Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, p. 14. Marr notes that “what may have cut the Vietnamese most deeply, then and later, was the fact that the Ming could rely on a significant contingent of native mandarin collaborators.”

Vietnam suffered severely under Ming control for just over two decades. But in a foreshadowing of how it would win two prolonged wars five centuries later, the Vietnamese rallied around a popular patriot and succeeded in pushing the foreigners out after a decade-long war of resistance in what today would be called a guerrilla action. Le Loi built a resistance movement for ten years before defeating the Chinese armies in 1428.⁷⁰ He then founded the Le Dynasty, which would reign, at least nominally, until the Tay Son Rebellion late in the 18th century.

5. Overreach and Partition

In the centuries that followed Ming China's brief but harsh rule, Vietnamese southern expansion was accompanied by the ancient problem of internal divisiveness. Separate and competing dynasties emerged and partitioned the country in 1545. Prolonged periods of warfare between the northern Trinh dynasty and the southern Nguyen dynasty dominated the 16th and 17th centuries. Each claimed the entire nation, and both spent much of their time and resources attempting to depose the other, leaving the peasantry impoverished. The divisiveness also left Vietnam weaker and more susceptible to outside intervention just as the number of potential intervening forces was increasing.

Early in the 17th century, Europeans began their slow but increasing presence and influence in Vietnam, as in most of Asia.⁷¹ European weapons altered the indigenous balance of power as early as 1631, when the Nguyen, though far outnumbered by the Trinh in terms

⁷⁰Chapuis, p. 101.

⁷¹SarDesai, p. 31.

of men, elephants and junks, were able to hold their own against their northern rivals thanks to the acquisition of Portuguese gunpowder and arms. This outside help from non-Chinese sources constituted a new facet of Vietnamese strategic culture. The Nguyen again benefitted in war from outside assistance in the mid-17th century when thousands of ethnic Chinese (who had fled to southern Vietnam from China as the Ming Dynasty gave way to the Qing) supported them against the Trinh.⁷² This utilization of foreigners and foreign resources to achieve their own aims would become an increasingly important part of Vietnamese strategic culture in later years.

6. Learning to Utilize Foreign Assistance

While the long tributary relationship with China made asking for foreign help (i.e., the Chinese emperor's help) conceivable, in practice it was not usually done. Yet during the Tay Son Rebellion (1771-1802), the Le Dynasty ruler did just that.⁷³ He fled to China and requested the Chinese Emperor's assistance when the Tay Son took over northern Vietnam. In 1788 the Tay Son defeated a 200,000-strong Chinese army sent to crush their rebellion. Immediately after their victory, the Tay Son, like the many rulers before them, sent tribute to the just-defeated China and requested recognition.

At the same time, the displaced heir to the southern dynasty tried to secure French assistance to help him re-establish his dynasty, which the Tay Son had replaced. The heir, Nguyen Anh, went so far as to send his son to the distant court of King Louis XVI,

⁷²Cima, pp. 21, 23.

⁷³Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, p. 16.

accompanied by a resourceful French bishop, Pigneau de Behaine. The French ruler signed an agreement to provide Nguyen Anh substantial aid, but never actually intended to finance the endeavor. Despite this duplicity, French aid did arrive in Vietnam in 1789 by way of the determined Bishop de Behaine, who ended up raising his own funds, acquiring his own ships, and hiring his own navy (of French deserters).⁷⁴ His personal crusade to restore the Nguyen Dynasty to rule of Vietnam (which included him personally fighting in battle) was motivated by Nguyen Anh's promise to allow French missionaries back into Vietnam. While Nguyen Anh finally did gain his throne, de Behaine did not live to see it. He died in Vietnam, which he considered his "second homeland," just before the turn of the century, and was honored as a hero in the south. Nguyen Anh, however, is portrayed today by the VCP as a traitor for giving the French a foothold in Vietnam, and is often compared with Ngo Dinh Diem.⁷⁵

Strong as the Tay Son had proved against the Chinese, Nguyen Anh finally defeated them, in part thanks to what Behaine had provided him: a "steady flow of ships, arms, and European advisers, who supervised the building of forts, shipyards, cannon foundries and bomb factories, and instructed the Vietnamese in the manufacture and use of modern armaments."⁷⁶ In 1802 Nguyen Anh became the great unifying emperor Gia Long, his reign name meaning "from Saigon to Hanoi." Once his goal was attained with the missionaries' help, Gia Long and his successors betrayed his promises to these foreign benefactors. Those

⁷⁴Chapuis, pp. 178, 192.

⁷⁵SarDesai, pp. 30, 32; and Chapuis, p. 188.

⁷⁶SarDesai, p. 17.

who remained or returned were repressed, even tortured and executed - actions which later gave the French justification to intervene in Vietnam.⁷⁷

This phenomenon of utilizing foreign aid and then arrogantly dismissing the benefactor once the goal is achieved - oblivious to future consequences - would be seen again. Once reunification was assured in 1975, Vietnam began to consciously antagonize China. This resulted in the loss of Chinese aid in 1978, a destructive invasion in 1979, and complete dependence on the Soviet Union for over a decade - which brought its own troubling consequences.

After defeating the Chinese army, like each of his many predecessors Gia Long continued Vietnam's tributary relationship with China and requested investiture of his rule from the Chinese emperor. The new Vietnamese ruler also attempted to re-name his country Nam Viet, its name precisely 2,000 years earlier before the millenium of Chinese rule began. "For the Chinese, however, this was too reminiscent of the wayward General Trieu Da. [Thus] in conferring investiture on the new government, the Chinese inverted the name to Viet Nam, the first use of that name for the country."⁷⁸ Here we see glimpses of how important history - or more importantly, perceptions of history - can be in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship.

⁷⁷Chapuis, p. 186. Chapuis notes that "towards the Western powers, Gia Long's hidden xenophobia affected his foreign policy. During the war, he refrained from displaying his true feelings for fear of losing Pigneau's aid. But after receiving recognition from China, his first move was to restrain missionary activity."

⁷⁸Cima, pp. 26-27.

Also evident is just how much influence China had over Vietnam at this time, despite China's having failed to adequately perform her role as protector of Vietnam. One might reasonably expect Vietnam to have abandoned her place in the sinic system after the weakness of the protector had been so thoroughly exposed. Instead,

although he owed his throne to the French, Gia Long chose the Chinese as his masters, so compelling were the Confucian bonds to which Vietnam had for centuries submitted. Despite the evidence of Western technological superiority, the Vietnamese remained entrenched in the idea that China was the most powerful nation on earth and that Westerners were no better than Mongolian barbarians.⁷⁹

The new ruler of Vietnam requested investiture from his vanquished protectors, allowed his country to take the name they assigned rather than the one he desired, and resumed sending tribute to the Chinese emperor.⁸⁰ This is a clear example of the way strategic culture continues in spite of changes in the strategic calculus, but perhaps also was a realistic acknowledgement of latent Chinese power that Vietnam was better off not awakening. The failure to recognize French power, however, would bring tragedy for Vietnam, for the killing of missionaries under Gia Long's successors ultimately gave France

⁷⁹Chapuis, p. 183.

⁸⁰Lucian Pye attributes this to Vietnam having "psychologically 'identified with the aggressor' and thereby adopting the arrogance of their former colonial rulers . . . both the Chinese and the French." He notes that Gia Long "replicated to the smallest detail the Chinese imperial court system," and that during French rule Vietnam assimilated to European culture better than any other Asian colony. Pye, p. 236. Oscar Chapuis charges that Gia Long's law code was actually "a mere copy of the Ching code, without any reference to Vietnam's culture and traditions. He was carrying out the law ... as if Vietnam continued to be a Chinese province. The failure to promote a national code of conduct would undermine Vietnam's spirit and prepare the country for further renunciation." Chapuis, p. 185.

the pretext to intervene in Vietnam.⁸¹ Vietnam's strategic culture would significantly evolve in the nearly two centuries since the days of Gia Long's rule, but these elements of Vietnamese strategic culture - of embracing foreign assistance, but only until the goal was achieved, and of disregarding a significant foreign threat - would continue. Each would be evident regarding China at the time of Vietnam's reunification two decades ago.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 195.

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III. MODERN INFLUENCES ON VIETNAMESE STRATEGIC CULTURE

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how Vietnamese strategic culture has evolved since French colonial times. After thousands of years in the Chinese orbit, Vietnam's options to achieve her national goals increased with the arrival of the West. Vietnamese strategic culture at this time embraced a new method of achieving the ancient aim of remaining distinct from China. This new method, and element of Vietnamese strategic culture, involved a tendency to look to - and an ability to attract - outside forces for benefaction and protection to counter Chinese power.

A. COLONIAL ERA INFLUENCES

Some elements of Vietnamese strategic culture have remained constant while others have changed since the arrival of the West in Vietnam. The French colonial era reaffirmed Vietnamese disdain for foreign rule, for example, while French rule itself was enabled by Vietnamese divisiveness and collaboration. Ironically, the era of French rule also exposed independence-minded Vietnamese to Western ideas and influences that helped them eventually to achieve their goal. The goal of independence ultimately was achieved, but not by a consensus of Vietnamese nationalists. Rather, Ho Chi Minh and his communist organization were able to found and lead the Democratic Republic of Vietnam only by having the will and the means to suppress divisiveness sufficiently, violently eliminating foes when deemed necessary to do so. In this manner Ho was prepared to take advantage of "the

opportune moment” when it arrived.⁸² Even then, sustained independence did not yet exist; most of the three decades after independence was declared in 1945 would be filled with wars in which Vietnamese fought Vietnamese.

Consumed with its own partition in the wake of the Opium Wars, China took no action as the French gradually acquired control of Vietnam beginning in the mid-19th century. China eventually fought the French in Vietnam, but notably only when China’s own interests were threatened once France set its sights on control of Tonkin, the northern region bordering China. China was unsuccessful in fighting the French, and in 1885 the Chinese were forced by France to renounce their suzerainty over Vietnam after almost a millenium.

While China failed to live up to her end of the tributary relationship in the face of the French takeover, Vietnam was most responsible for her vulnerability to foreign domination. For centuries internal division and civil war had weakened Vietnam. The tendency to fight each other left Vietnam vulnerable to the old Chinese strategy of divide and rule, and now that strategy would be practiced by the French. Rather than band together to fight off French encroachment, the Vietnamese people instead splintered into factions. Vietnamese “collaborator” elites personally profited along with Frenchmen while forcing the vast majority of their countrymen off the land and into abject poverty. Even the many nationalist and anti-colonialist groups that sprung up around the country could not seem to act in concert. There

⁸²David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 378.

were vehement, and often violent, disagreements about goals, timetables, and who would lead.⁸³ But

for many Vietnamese the deepest psychological agony would stem from a realization that the French . . . succeeded in consolidating their power largely by the use of some Vietnamese to destroy other Vietnamese.⁸⁴

1. The Search for New Ways

The French replaced the Chinese as primary foreign influencer of Vietnam in the late 19th century. Just as periods of Chinese rule or intervention always had, the French period confirmed the major element of Vietnamese strategic culture - hatred of, and resistance to, alien rule. The French era also demonstrated once again the enduring problem for Vietnam that made it vulnerable to foreign influence: internal divisiveness. Some Vietnamese collaborated with French overlords for their own gain at the expense of the common good; some resisted at their own peril. Other Vietnamese gained exposure to Western ideas that would one day help them re-gain independence. David Marr asserts that in particular the period from “1920 to the Great Depression there was a rush of truly startling changes, first in the economy and then in the social realms.”⁸⁵

The prime influences on Vietnam’s strategic culture during the late 19th and early 20th centuries stemmed from the massive societal changes that resulted from France’s rise to power in Indochina and Imperial China’s simultaneous decline and collapse. This cataclysmic

⁸³Jean Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh and His Vietnam: A Personal Memoir*, transl. by Herma Briffault (Chicago: Cowles Book Co., 1972), p. 21; and Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, p. 271.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 43.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 261.

combination produced the delegitimization of the old (i.e., Chinese) ways and a necessary, even urgent search for new (i.e., western) ways. The use of external ideas and aid to accomplish Vietnam's goals - to be exploited so expertly by Ho Chi Minh - was thus both an effect (or dependent variable) of the turbulent times and a cause (or independent variable) of Vietnam's eventual re-gaining of independence and re-unification.

China taught Vietnam well and then eventually lost political control of her;⁸⁶ French rule followed roughly the same scenario, albeit on a shorter timeline. In Vietnam and in the Indochinese expatriate community which flourished in Paris after the First World War, young Vietnamese nationalists and anticolonialists began the search for new ways and ideas that might free their country of French control. They began studying socialism, communism, Meiji Japan, the teachings of Sun Yat-sen, and later both Lenin and the Russian Revolution and Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points."⁸⁷ Ironically, the French opened this new world of ideas to the Vietnamese incidental to their attempt to control Vietnam. Exposure to this knowledge, combined with the very limited opportunities the French offered to "work within the system" eventually contributed to the ouster of both France and the United States from Indochina. I will suggest that the failure of their traditional protector and their traditional concepts to protect them, and the obvious success of western ideas and power, combined to produce dramatic changes in Vietnamese society. These changes altered Vietnam's strategic culture.

⁸⁶Cima, p. 9.

⁸⁷Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, p. 471.

2. Ho Chi Minh's Legacy

Ho Chi Minh was born in 1890, five years after the end of the Franco-Chinese War.⁸⁸ In many ways his life embodied Vietnam's pragmatic turn away from tradition and her search for new ideas and tools to help her regain independence. After centuries of Confucian and sinic influence, Ho's pragmatic use of western ideas was a dramatic change in Vietnam's traditional strategic culture, but exactly the sort of adjustment expected following a cataclysmic change in a nation's situation. The evidence of dramatic change seen in Ho's life begins with the fact that his father - a Confucian scholar - refused to school the young Nguyen That Thanh (Ho's given name) in the Confucian classics, which had proved so useless in defending Vietnam against the arrival of the West.

Ho Chi Minh left his homeland for 30 consecutive years, yet worked toward gaining its independence virtually the entire time,⁸⁹ underscoring how important foreign ideas and support were to Vietnam in regaining her independence.⁹⁰ Ho left Vietnam as a steward on a French freighter in 1911,⁹¹ not returning to Vietnam until he slipped across the northern

⁸⁸ "Ho Chi Minh," or "He Who Enlightens," was the last of perhaps hundreds of aliases used by the founder of the Vietminh and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

⁸⁹ Incredibly, Ho reportedly saw Hanoi for the first time in his life when he marched triumphantly into the city in late August 1945 to declare the independence, and himself president, of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, p. 489.

⁹⁰ Edgar O'Ballance, *The Wars in Vietnam* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1981), p. 142; and Sainteny, p. 2.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 1.

border in 1941 just after founding the Vietminh.⁹² His travels took him to London, Paris (the metropole of his country's own colonizers), Moscow, China,⁹³ Thailand, and even, as a very young man, to the United States. As one scholar notes:

Ho Chi Minh's unequalled knowledge of the world outside Vietnam apparently convinced him that Vietnam was too small a country ever to generate a successful revolution, in such a predatory age, without some outside help and that serene and persistent manipulation of foreign governments and foreign political parties sooner or later might give the Vietnamese Communists enough internal and external political leverage to achieve Vietnam's independence.⁹⁴

A very early attempt at gaining this sort of help from the outside world took place in 1919 while Ho Chi Minh, then known by the alias Nguyen Ai Quoc ("Nguyen the Patriot"), was living in Paris. He was part of a community of Vietnamese nationalists, many of whom had arrived in France to serve as battlefield porters on the Western Front during the First World War. Inspired by the American President Woodrow Wilson's rhetoric about self-determination for all nations, Ho submitted a petition to the Paris Peace Conference at

⁹²Weldon A. Brown, *Prelude to Disaster* (London: Kennikat Press, 1975), pp. 9-12.

⁹³Ho was in China by 1925, working as the "Chinese translator" for the famous Comintern agent Borodin. Ho used this time in China to recruit fellow expatriates, like Pham Van Dong, to his personal cause, and there laid the groundwork for all that followed. Also, with typical pragmatism, Ho began his long association with both the CCP and KMT. In the decades ahead, he would work with each, during periods when the two parties were working together themselves and when they were not. Sainteny, pp. 22-23; Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, p. 177.

⁹⁴David Joel Steinberg, *In Search of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), p. 356.

Versailles that asked for reform in Vietnam and for eventual independence from France. Ho did not get to meet with Wilson, and his petition was rejected.⁹⁵

Soon after this incident during the Versailles conference, Ho became a member of the French Socialist Party, and shortly thereafter became a founding member of the French Communist Party. Within a few years of his rejection at Versailles, Ho went to Moscow for training, and subsequently began about two decades of work and constant travel as an agent of the Comintern.⁹⁶ A quarter of a century later another American president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, would again raise Ho Chi Minh's hopes that the United States would help him achieve his quest for independence for Vietnam. But post-World War II considerations, just as at Versailles, emphasized "bigger issues" (i.e., the fate of Europe), with Vietnam's fate a derivative of American policymakers' decisions on France. While Ho realized quite early in his career that the Vietnamese people would be his primary source of strength in achieving his goals, he also decided that with Vietnam dominated by a powerful foreign state he would need the help of other powerful states to give him the means to achieve his ends.⁹⁷ Even if Ho had received help from the United States in bringing independence to Vietnam, though, he almost certainly would have never been an "exclusive client." He sought any and all help from "wherever it [was] offered."⁹⁸

⁹⁵Herring, p. 5; Karnow, pp. 133-135, Brown, p. 10; and Sainteny, p. 20.

⁹⁶Ibid., pp. 21-23.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 2.

⁹⁸James R. Arnold, *The First Domino: Eisenhower, the Military, and America's Intervention in Vietnam* (William Morrow and Co., 1991), p. 37.

B. WORLD WAR II AND THE “OPPORTUNE TIME”

By the time the Second World War began, Vietnamese anticolonialists / nationalists had debated many possible paths to re-establishing indigenous control of their country. They lacked a consensus, however, on which path was the proper one, or which group would lead the nation down that path. Once again, the problems of internal divisiveness - even among Vietnamese with the same general goal of independence - and collaboration prevented real movement of any group toward achieving their goals. The French Surete could “divide and rule” with relative ease.

Like many Asian peoples, the Vietnamese soon saw the myth of Western invincibility destroyed with the rise of Japan. This gave rise to the consensus among Vietnamese that Vietnam could and should be ruled indigenously. While divisiveness remained over who should actually rule, by war’s end Ho Chi Minh was better prepared than any other independence-minded Vietnamese to take advantage of the opportunity that the fall of Japan provided. His career as an agent of the Comintern notwithstanding, Ho willingly subordinated his goals of communism to the far broader goal of nationalism in order to consolidate control of Vietnam.⁹⁹ He also was willing to use whatever methods required. Ho included rival nationalists (and even the abdicated emperor Bao Dai) in his cabinet in the

⁹⁹George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1987), p. 22; and Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, p. 168. Marr asserts that by May 1941 Ho was ignoring the Comintern line altogether, and Kahin argues that this “evident subordination of communism to nationalism” is probably what caused “Soviet tardiness in recognizing Hanoi” after World War II.

newly-created DRV in 1945, for instance, but also had many rival nationalists killed.¹⁰⁰ And while Ho “voluntarily disbanded” the Indochinese Communist Party in 1945, it would turn out that membership in the “non-existent” party grew significantly in the years that followed its disbanding.¹⁰¹

C. HO CHI MINH’S COMMUNIST ERA

Ho Chi Minh effectively exploited the relatively new element of Vietnamese strategic culture of utilizing external aid to achieve goals. Long before the war’s end, Ho Chi Minh began to seek such aid from the United States. He initiated contact with the American military and OSS in China and invited them to join and train his Vietminh in northern Vietnam, which they did.¹⁰² Shortly thereafter, his declaration of independence for Vietnam on September 2, 1945 was largely - and purposefully - modeled on the American one.¹⁰³ His speech that day also included a direct appeal for American help, as did the numerous letters and cables he sent to President Truman until the decade’s close. There was never a response, however, and low-level secret meetings in Bangkok between Vietminh and U.S. State Department representatives also came to naught.¹⁰⁴ In January 1950 American policy finally was made incontrovertibly clear with the establishment of overt aid for the French effort in

¹⁰⁰Herring, p 5.

¹⁰¹Kahin, p. 101.

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁰³Ho Chi Minh, “The Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Vietnam,” reprinted in Harry J. Benda and John A. Larkin, eds., *The World of Southeast Asia: Selected Historical Readings* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 270-73.

¹⁰⁴Herring, pp. 11-13; and Arnold, pp. 32, 40-42.

Indochina.¹⁰⁵ The United States would not assist the DRV, and Ho Chi Minh would have to look elsewhere for aid to achieve his goals.

Despite the Vietnamese people's long tradition of fearing and resisting domination by any foreign power, Ho Chi Minh's cultivation and exploitation of outside powers was not without precedent. The precedents, however, had usually ended in disaster for Vietnam.¹⁰⁶ But Ho's successful use of foreign powers without becoming an unrewarded pawn was integral to his success in achieving independence for, and the eventual reunification of, Vietnam. This legacy of Ho goes far toward explaining and understanding Vietnam's current strategic culture. While Ho was not the first Vietnamese nationalist to fight to free Vietnam from foreign domination and influence, nor the first to solicit foreign help to aid his cause, he

¹⁰⁵Overt aid augmented a far greater amount of "covert" aid: assistance earmarked for France itself that for years was merely channelled through France to Indochina. The United States began supporting the French "indirectly" as early as the late summer of 1945. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, famous for his hatred of both DeGaulle and French colonialism, had purposefully never been able to "find the ships" to send Free French forces to Indochina. Truman, however, did not share FDR's view that ending French colonialism in Indochina was an American priority. He quickly "found the ships" and enabled the French to return to Indochina, something that France could not have physically accomplished without U.S. assistance. American support continued and increased throughout the 1946-1954 Franco-Vietnamese war. After Dienbienphu and Geneva, American support continued, ceasing to go through the French and instead going directly to the U.S.-created state of South Vietnam. Kahin, pp. 21, 36; Arnold, p. 211; and Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, pp. 270, 291, 545.

¹⁰⁶The Ming conquest that began in 1407 and the harsh two-decade-long rule that followed it were the result of a request by Vietnamese landed elites that China intervene and replace a reform-minded emperor. Furthermore, the French gained a foothold in Vietnam in the late 1700's when requested to assist the future emperor Gia Long. A century later China backed a revolt in northern Vietnam. France defeated China and forced her to renounce her suzerainty over Vietnam after nearly a thousand years of suzerainty. Karnow, pp. 74-77; and FitzGerald, p. 9.

mastered these techniques and used them to great, albeit hard-earned, success. There persists among Vietnam's leadership to this day the belief that Vietnam can successfully attract benefactors to balance against Chinese power. To explain Vietnam's inappropriate belligerence toward China since reunification in 1975-76, one must understand the context and consequences of Vietnam's requests for and receipt of aid from both China and the Soviet Union in the four decades between the creation of the former and the dissolution of the latter.

D. FORCED TO LOOK NORTH: CHINESE AND SOVIET AID

In late 1945 Ho Chi Minh gave a warning to the senior OSS officer in Vietnam: "if you do not help us achieve our goal, I know a country that will be only too glad to come to our aid!"¹⁰⁷ Whether bluffing or believing this, Ho initially was not correct. Neither the Soviet Union nor China were immediately helpful to him, even after his war against France began in December 1946. At the end of World War II, China still had four years of internal conflict ahead of it before the CCP would come to power. Stalin, meanwhile, was more interested in the prospect of France itself turning communist than in Ho Chi Minh gaining control of Vietnam. For fear of alienating the French people by the loss of one of their colonies to communist forces, Stalin withheld support from the Vietminh. Even the French Communist Party, reflecting the same concerns that Stalin had, did not support the Vietminh until the end of 1949.¹⁰⁸ Thus Ho and the Vietminh were quite on their own, and prospects

¹⁰⁷ Arnold, p. 32.

¹⁰⁸ Harold C. Hinton, "Conclusion," ed. Gene T. Hsiao, *The Role of External Powers in the Indochina Crisis* (Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), p. 174; and Kahin, pp. 21-23.

for their success were less than overwhelming. In 1949, however, events occurred which began to change Vietnam's prospects for foreign help, and thus for success.

1. Benefaction

Two major events in the autumn of that year changed the calculus of the great powers: the Soviets tested their first nuclear weapon, and the CCP came to power in China, establishing the People's Republic. These developments led to the drafting of NSC-68 and helped clarify the course of the Cold War to follow. At the same time Ho Chi Minh made a world-wide appeal for assistance and recognition, and both the Soviet Union and the PRC recognized the DRV in January 1950. That same month, just months after their own rise to power, the Chinese began assisting their southern neighbors and fellow communists,¹⁰⁹ while Stalin finally began to offer ideological support, though nothing else.¹¹⁰

In June of that year the Korean War began. This development hurt the Vietminh in the short term, as it necessitated a reduction in assistance to them from the Chinese. However, it did help clearly establish "sides" for the Cold War, and make Vietnam a strategic (and "hot") site of the superpower rivalry. As a result Vietnam secured Chinese and Soviet assistance which would last for decades.

The Chinese and Vietnamese communists worked together to defeat the French in North Vietnam from 1950 on, and worked especially closely from mid-1953 to mid-1954, once Chinese troops and resources were freed up from service in the Korean War. Chinese

¹⁰⁹Arnold, p. 91.

¹¹⁰Kahin, pp. 21-22.

aid was crucial to the very survival of the Vietminh in 1950, and later to the final victory over the French at Dienbienphu in 1954.¹¹¹ Yet even in the midst of their cooperation, relations between the ancient rivals were often tense.¹¹²

For all his dedication to communism, “Ho was no tool of the Soviet Union,” as one scholar notes. It has been argued that, lacking U.S. support, “he had no choice but to . . . accept help from the major Communist powers.” But Ho was not prepared to “subordinate Vietnamese independence” to either Chinese or Soviet goals. This was particularly true with regards to China, for “Vietnam’s historic fears of its larger northern neighbor made submission to China especially unlikely.”¹¹³

2. Perceptions of Betrayal

As soon as the Korean war ended in 1953, more Chinese aid than ever began to arrive in northern Vietnam, rising from just 10 to 20 tons of war materiel monthly in 1951 to 1,500 tons a month in early 1954.¹¹⁴ This support, along with sanctuary in China, undoubtedly made the difference for the Viet Minh, significantly contributing to their victory at Dienbienphu on May 7, 1954, which drove France from Indochina after centuries of presence and influence. However, this support in the north of Vietnam, which was to China’s own benefit, would not be repeated in the south.

¹¹¹Ibid., p. 44.

¹¹²Herring, p. 14; Turley, “Vietnamese Security,” p. 179; and C.P. FitzGerald, p. 13.

¹¹³Herring, pp. 12, 18.

¹¹⁴Duiker, p. 161.

Disappointingly for the Vietnamese, the assistance that culminated in the fall of the French at Dienbienphu proved to be the high-water mark, rather than a watershed, of cooperation between Vietnam and China. Literally the next day - when the Geneva Conference on Indochina opened - the Vietnamese saw Chinese interests diverging from their own. The Chinese, along with the Soviets, pressed the victorious Vietminh to accept less in political gains at Geneva than the Vietnamese felt they had earned on the battlefield.¹¹⁵ Once the “buffer state” of North Vietnam was established, the PRC was far less militarily or diplomatically supportive of the Vietminh in their efforts to reunify Vietnam.¹¹⁶ Some of this reflected Soviet and Chinese attempts to avoid antagonizing the more powerful United States, but China was perhaps equally interested in a more traditional Chinese goal: preventing the creation of a too-powerful state on its southern border.¹¹⁷ A precedent for this occurred in the 19th century, when China remained aloof to the colonization of Vietnam by the French, only acting to “protect” her suzerain when Tonkin - the part of Vietnam on China’s border, and thus threatening to China herself - was threatened by the French.

In the following decades, the PRC would continue in this vein. China did not support North Vietnam to the extent that the Vietnamese thought she should in the fight against the

¹¹⁵SarDesai, pp. 125-26.

¹¹⁶Kahin, pp. 52-65.

¹¹⁷King C. Chen, “The Chinese Role in the Indochina Crisis,” ed. Gene T. Tsiao, *The Role of External Powers in the Indochina Crisis* (Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), pp. 65-70; and SarDesai, p. 126. SarDesai explains the re-emergence of Sino-Vietnamese tensions in 1975-76 as a result of Chinese displeasure at the prospect of the emergence of a strong Vietnamese state on their border.

Americans, and purposely slowed up delivery of Soviet aid to Vietnam.¹¹⁸ Mao Zedong and his military chief, Lin Biao, reasoned that it was to China's benefit to prolong the Americans' costly effort in Vietnam, and thus they recommended this strategy to Hanoi.¹¹⁹ In Vietnamese eyes, however, China failed to consider the obvious costs such a strategy would also impose on the Vietnamese themselves. The most devastating of all of China's actions for Vietnam was undoubtedly that China decreased aid to Vietnam after she learned that Vietnam had begun negotiating with the Americans, then herself secretly began orchestrating a rapprochement with the Americans. This culminated in China's 1971 entry into the United Nations and Nixon's 1972 visit to China. The image of the American president on the Great Wall, while American bombs were still falling on Hanoi, is extremely difficult for Vietnam to forget.¹²⁰

Due to the necessity of maintaining Chinese aid and support, border disputes and competing claims at sea, just like these perceptions of betrayal, were largely suppressed by Vietnam's leaders until victory and reunification could be achieved. Upon victory, however, these disagreements would lead to the dissolution of cooperation and the resumption of the

¹¹⁸Hinton, "Conclusion," p. 173; and SarDesai, p. 126. Passage by rail of Soviet war materiel through China was strictly limited in both quantity and type of cargo, with significant amounts stolen off the trains en route; and air transfer via China was forbidden.

¹¹⁹D.P. Mozingo and T.W. Robinson, *Lin Biao on 'People's War': China Takes a Second Look at Vietnam*, RAND RM-4814-PR (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, November 1965); Hinton, "Conclusion," p. 172; and SarDesai, p. 125.

¹²⁰Harold C. Hinton, "The People's Republic of China and the World, 1949-81," in Hungdah Chiu and Shao-Chuan Leng, eds., *China: Seventy Years After the 1911 Hsin-Hai Revolution* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984), p. 500; Karnow, pp. 54-55; Hinton, "Conclusion," p. 178; and Duiker, p. 337.

ancient antagonistic relationship of old.¹²¹ A prime example is how in 1958 DRV Prime Minister Pham Van Dong communicated his government's endorsement of China's territorial claims to the South China Sea, but then in 1976, under reunified Vietnam, reversed this position.¹²²

After reunification, as Chinese aid tapered off, Soviet aid to Vietnam continued, enabling Vietnam to disagree with and disregard China.¹²³ Yet this would create more problems for Vietnam than it solved, as it also enabled Vietnam's leaders to persist in both an invalid strategic culture and inefficient policies. Chinese aid would end altogether in 1978 as relations between China and Vietnam soured, leaving the latter solely dependent on the Soviet Union. This development - a result of Vietnam's own strategic choices - would bring disastrous strategic results for Vietnam and equally poor economic results for her people.

¹²¹Valencia, pp. 32-34; SarDesai, p. 125; and Duiker, p. 339.

¹²²Steven J. Hood, *Dragons Entangled: Indochina and the China-Vietnam War* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), pp. 124-25; and Leifer, p. 274.

¹²³This is reminiscent of Gia Long's repressive treatment of the French missionaries once his aim of reunification had been achieved with their help. Chapuis, p. 186.

IV. POST-REUNIFICATION / POST-HO CHI MINH STRATEGIC CULTURE

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how Vietnam's strategic culture, after achieving military victory and reunification, became increasingly challenged by the rapidly evolving strategic environment in the region. Despite the changes in the strategic calculus that resulted first from the end of the war for reunification and later from the end of the Cold War, Vietnam's strategic culture continues to lag behind her true strategic situation.

A. SUCCESS AND HUBRIS

Vietnam's strategic culture since reunification two decades ago has been repeatedly challenged by the strategic realities facing the country. It has been dysfunctional in that the Vietnamese Communist Party's decisions have ignored certain strategic realities and misjudged others. The result has been war and international isolation, which have led directly to poverty and military weakness relative to potential enemies. With her strategic culture thus poorly matched to her actual strategic situation, the VCP's own decisions led very quickly to the opposite outcomes of her own goals.

If Vietnamese strategic culture was effective enough to drive out the Americans and to achieve final victory in 1975, how can it be utilized to cope with the contemporary world? In one sense Vietnam's strategic culture remained relatively constant in the era immediately following reunification; in another sense Vietnam adjusted her strategic culture, dropping one important element - putting differences aside and pragmatically cooperating with China.

Vietnamese strategic culture remained steady because the VCP viewed their victory as confirmation of the effectiveness of their strategic culture; yet the end of Vietnam's long

war, and the end of the West's long presence on the Asian mainland that it entailed, quite naturally and dramatically changed the strategic situation for virtually all Asian nations. Regarding both Vietnam's inability to adjust to this change and her dropping of the crucial element of cooperation / appeasement with China, Douglas Pike and Lucian Pye each argue that there is an element of hubris involved. Pike attributes it to the dramatic nature of the North's victory over the South in 1975:

The overwhelming victory was ruinous for strategic thinking in Hanoi The stunning success created among members of the High Command and Politburo such a sense of superiority of their doctrine that they were unable to treat new strategic needs objectively The result in each case was grief and injury for Vietnam.¹²⁴

Pike echoes the common charge against victorious militaries that they tend to refight the previous war while their vanquished enemies learn lessons from their loss and end up better prepared for the next war. Pye argues that this hubris is not merely the result of the communist victory but is rather a trait which is embedded in Vietnam's national culture. Pye explains that Vietnam's history of "outdoing the foreigner at his own game" has created this arrogance, and that it has created a "politics of stubborn pride which can easily be out of touch with reality." Pye also notes that an accusation of a leader "selling out ... is so feared that the only alternative is to prove steadfastness by becoming totally uncompromising, even when reasonableness would be profitable."¹²⁵

¹²⁴Douglas Pike, quoted in Betts, p. 62.

¹²⁵Pye, pp. 240, 242-243.

Ironically, Vietnam's eventual victories over her oppressors historically have not been translated into material benefits for her people. Pye notes that this was the case in the tenth century, when long-awaited independence quickly turned to divisiveness, chaos and poverty. Increased poverty similarly occurred after war's end in 1975 and was at least partially the result of strategic decisions made by Vietnam's leaders, many of which exacerbated divisiveness.

B. ILL-FITTING STRATEGIES, QUESTIONABLE DECISIONS

Soviet aid to Vietnam during the 1970's (both before and after reunification) and the 1980's helps explain why Vietnam's strategic culture was able to prevail in the midst of changing strategic realities. Soviet aid enabled Vietnam to take action beyond her own means in Cambodia, to give extensive aid to Laos while being a major aid recipient herself, and, no longer requiring Chinese aid, to exacerbate unnecessarily her difficult relations with China.¹²⁶ Had Vietnam been constrained by the need to actually provide for her own food and produce and pay for each bullet she shot, Vietnam would have been logistically unable to either make or carry out some of her questionable strategic decisions. These decisions include:

- focusing on Indochina as her top geostrategic priority;
- placing ideological considerations above economic ones;
- ignoring naval and air force development while claiming vast maritime areas; and
- failing to exercise "common sense regarding her large neighbor, China.

¹²⁶Turley, "Vietnamese Security," p. 207.

Though the first three areas each inter-relate in various ways and contribute to the fourth, each will be discussed individually.

1. The Focus on Indochina

The VCP's focus on Indochina as their top geostrategic priority over most of the two decades since reunification is a prime example of how Vietnam's strategic culture has failed her.¹²⁷

Lucian Pye attributes Vietnam's desire to exercise military and political control over Indochina as being an idea inherited from the French colonial era, an example of Vietnam's tendency to "identify with the enemy" (in this case, France), and an attempt to out-do the master at his own game.¹²⁸ The nature of the "game" had changed since the French era, but the VCP was not attuned to this. In the 1980's Vietnam would almost certainly have done better to concentrate on her own economic development and to develop substantial economic influence, through trade and aid, in Cambodia and Laos. Instead, at great cost in both blood and treasure, Vietnam became bogged down in what has been described as "Vietnam's Vietnam"¹²⁹ - a decade-long attempt to impose her political will on Indochina through extensive military means.

¹²⁷William S. Turley, "'More Friends, Fewer Enemies': Vietnam's Policy Toward Indochina-ASEAN Reconciliation," ed. Sheldon W. Simon, *East Asian Security in the Post-Cold War Era* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), pp. 171,176.

¹²⁸Pye, pp. 240-243.

¹²⁹Michael Williams, "Beyond the Revolution: Indonesia and Vietnam," ed. Mark Borthwick, *Pacific Century* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), p. 472.

The focus on controlling events in Indochina led in a variety of ways to economic weakness for Vietnam and ironically weakened her long-term influence in the region. Her invasion of Cambodia and long subsequent occupation of that nation prolonged the American embargo. It also increased ASEAN fear and action against her, as well as ASEAN solidarity, and increased Vietnam's isolation from China, further decreasing any prospect of aid or trade from that quarter. Vietnam was left with no course but almost solitary dependence on the Soviet Union, a desperate client in no position to set optimal terms. Over time, Vietnam's Cambodian venture also demoralized Vietnam's military and drained valuable resources, and the opportunity cost was substantial. While "ASEAN boomed" economically,¹³⁰ Vietnam in essence returned to the 18th century. For over a decade and at great cost, she attempted to secure her borders against and dictate events in an extremely weak nation. Her efforts ultimately were to poor effect, yet succeeded greatly in antagonizing China, which considered Indochina to be within its own sphere of influence, not Vietnam's.¹³¹

Essentially, Vietnam had her priorities in reverse of the course chosen by both the ASEAN nations and the PRC. In retrospect it is clear that Vietnam put achieving political and military goals first, deciding that once those were complete she could set about improving economically. Meanwhile the ASEAN states, with the help of the United States, and the PRC, through Deng Xiaoping's Four Modernizations, developed faster than any other part of the world throughout Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. The fruit of their strategies and

¹³⁰Turley, "Vietnamese Security," p. 177.

¹³¹Valencia, p. 34.

their labors is that they now can purchase and develop the militaries they want or need. Vietnam is just the opposite. The cost of Cambodia combined with the loss of Soviet benefaction left Vietnam unable to afford to maintain, let alone modernize, her armed forces, and operating equipment that was both inferior and unaffordable to maintain.¹³² This experience eventually convinced a number of Vietnamese leaders that her strategies were in need of adjustment.

2. Ideology First

Vietnam's placement of ideological concerns ahead of economic considerations negatively affected her economic well-being and is another case of her post-reunification strategic culture lagging behind her strategic situation.

The "re-education" campaign that immediately followed reunification resulted in the death, departure, or under-utilization of countless skilled southern Vietnamese. The anti-capitalism campaign just a few years later (beginning in the spring of 1978) had similar results; northern ethnic-Chinese Vietnamese (*Hoa*) fled overland into China by the tens of thousands, while southern *Hoa* departed by sea at great risk.¹³³ While thousands of the latter made it to other Asian countries, the United States, and elsewhere, unknown thousands died at sea. Others languished unproductively in refugee camps around the region.

Vietnam lagged far behind the PRC in following Deng Xiaoping's advice to ignore the color of the cat as long as it catches mice. The VCP remains quite conscious of how "red"

¹³²Betts, p. 72.

¹³³Nguyen-vo, Thu-Huong, *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Co., 1992), pp. 112-13.

individuals are. Like her focus on Indochina, this lack of pragmatism led to inefficiency, stagnation and poverty while her neighbors developed and was enabled to continue as long as it did due to Soviet benefaction.

3. Small Navy, Large Claims

By concentrating her energies on Indochina, Vietnam naturally focused her military resources on her army.¹³⁴ So in addition to the problems of sacrificing economic development, the VCP also largely ignored the modernization of Vietnam's naval and air forces. This seems odd for a nation which not only has some 3500 kilometers of coastline to guard¹³⁵ but which just after reunification also laid claim to a vast stretch of sea - several times larger than the nation itself - and the islands within it.

In the absence of naval and air power of her own, Vietnam relied on Soviet power in these fields. In addition to being a pragmatic necessity at the time, this is an example of what Pye describes as a historically pervasive dependence mentality on Vietnam's part, which it learned under the sinic system. Explaining why Vietnam became "surprisingly dependent upon the Soviet Union," Pye argues that "the intensity of Vietnamese nationalism in opposing French and, earlier, Chinese colonial domination led many observers to underestimate the Vietnamese craving for dependent ties with a properly nurturing superior authority."¹³⁶ Vietnam continued depending on Soviet naval and air power while neglecting development of her own, despite disconfirming evidence of the Soviets' will to fight alongside her when

¹³⁴Turley, "Vietnamese Security," p. 176.

¹³⁵1995 *World Factbook*, p. 453.

¹³⁶Pye, p. 240.

she needed help most: in February 1979, during China's 3-week-long "punitive" land attack in northern Vietnam, and during sea battles with China over control of the Spratlys in March 1988. The Soviets clearly placed a higher priority on avoiding undue antagonization of China than on defending Vietnam.

4. Antagonizing China

Vietnam's strategic culture did not foster such reluctance to exacerbate tensions with China. Vietnam's behavior since reunification in 1976 has greatly antagonized China, and normally in ways that Vietnam could not fail to have realized would do so. Even putting aside their historical relationship and all of the mistrust it entails, Vietnam failed to use "common sense" that any small nation should with regards to a large nation on her border - sense that had been part of her strategic culture under Ho Chi Minh's leadership and until reunification. One scholar observes that "only Vietnam would knowingly and unnecessarily antagonize China."¹³⁷

This shift in strategic culture was not a result of the cataclysmic success of the VCP in winning the war and reunifying Vietnam. Rather, this change was a modern manifestation of Vietnam's ancient tendency to attempt to remain distinct from China. A clear example of the shift was Vietnam's resumption of her historical claims to the South China Sea in 1976, year of the creation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). Its predecessor, the DRV, had acknowledged China's claims to the entire South China since the mid-1950's. With Chinese aid having served its purpose in helping Vietnam achieve independence, however, the

¹³⁷Hinton, "The People's Republic," p. 495.

VCP could now reassert its independence from China - and belatedly show its displeasure at China's wartime "betrayals" - by reviving Vietnam's own historical claims to the South China Sea. Making this belligerent action possible was the post-war continuance of Soviet aid, which Vietnam believed would offset the worsening of relations with China and the loss of Chinese aid that might (and quickly did) result from such a change in policy.¹³⁸

Numerous actions of the SRV in the late 1970's probably created Chinese perceptions of an apparent lack of Vietnamese appreciation for China's contributions to Vietnam's victory. These antagonistic actions include: Vietnam's claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea in 1976, after acknowledging Chinese claims for over two decades; Vietnam's repressive treatment of her *Hoa* population in the name of ideological purification; Vietnam's increasingly warm relationship with the Soviet Union, resulting in a November 1978 long-term treaty between the two; and Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia, which China viewed as evidence of Vietnamese hegemonic designs on Indochina.¹³⁹

I would argue that Vietnam seems to have misjudged China's ability to bring pressure to bear on her.¹⁴⁰ A case in point is the 1979 punitive invasion. Vietnam's treaty with the Soviets led the Chinese to keep the attack limited in both means and duration, but did not

¹³⁸Valencia, p. 32. Stanley Karnow argues that by this point the Vietnamese were rather unsatisfied with Chinese aid anyway, which by 1976 had been steadily reduced for nearly a decade - one of China's "betrayals." Karnow, p. 53; and Hinton, "Conclusion," p. 173.

¹³⁹Turley, "More Friends, Fewer Enemies": Vietnam's Policy," pp. 171, 173.

¹⁴⁰Leifer, p. 267.

prevent an incursion from occurring.¹⁴¹ And while China shortly withdrew her forces after an inconclusive venture, China continued her efforts to influence Vietnam in a manner far less costly to herself and far more costly for Vietnam. By financially backing the Khmer Rouge throughout the 1980's, China avoided engaging in fighting of her own. This enabled China to concentrate on economic growth, military modernization, and spreading her presence in the South China Sea while keeping Vietnam consumed with Cambodia and looking west rather than east. This is a clear failure of Vietnamese strategic culture to adjust to new strategic realities, particularly in the South China Sea, and has added to the conviction of reform-minded Vietnamese leaders that it was advisable to chart a new course.

C. CONSEQUENCES

The examples above illustrate how post-reunification Vietnamese strategic culture, temporarily enabled by Soviet aid, was dysfunctional, and how it resulted in her leaders making short-term decisions without realistic appraisal of probable strategic consequences. As a result reunified Vietnam has often over-reached, has been overly dependent on her ability

¹⁴¹China probably kept this brief war limited in both time and intensity in deference to Vietnam's Soviet backers. The PLA used mostly militia forces, rather than regular army units, and began withdrawing its forces on 5 March 1979. Essentially no sea or air assets, and certainly no nuclear weapons, were utilized. And while China did not gain the unequivocal victory she undoubtedly sought - she suffered some 20,000 casualties herself - the PLA did devastate large regions of northern Vietnam, and gained valuable insight on the readiness and capabilities of her long-untested forces. The PLA applied these lessons to its modernizing efforts during the ensuing years. Vietnam, meanwhile, went on to expend massive resources on Cambodia for over a decade, withdrawing in 1989 as its benefactor, the Soviet Union, first drastically reduced all aid before dissolving itself shortly thereafter. The result today is a far less capable Vietnamese military, and a vastly improved Chinese one, than at the time of the 1979 war. O'Ballance, pp. 222-225; Betts, p. 67, and Nguyen-vo, p. 140.

to obtain external assistance, and has left herself to this day weakened in many ways. Vietnam is militarily weaker today, for example, in real terms from her past peak strength; she is also far weaker relative to stronger neighbors like China and Thailand.¹⁴² Vietnam is marginally stronger in real economic terms since economic reform (*doi moi*) began in 1986, but weaker economically relative to most of her neighbors than she was two decades ago - at the close of a long and destructive war. This is a result of her own strategic culture and the decisions that characterize it.

Vietnam has been shocked into change in many areas. Perestroika and glasnost made *doi moi* both possible and necessary, for instance.¹⁴³ Likewise, the decline of the Soviet Union made it essential that Vietnam begin to pursue her policy of courting “more friends” beginning in the late 1980’s. This new approach resulted in her courtship and 1995 joining of ASEAN, her meeting of U.S. conditions (mostly concerning POW/MIA matters) to get the American-led embargo dropped, and her overture for alliance with China. The latter, made in 1991, was politely turned down - “comrades, yes; allies, no” - but relations were at least normalized at that time.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴²Betts, p. 72.

¹⁴³*Doi moi* was less a strategic choice than a necessary change in the wake of both the popular failure of collectivization of agriculture and industry and the severe reduction in Soviet aid that accompanied Gorbachev’s perestroika. Benedict Kerkvliet, “Village-State Relations in Vietnam: The Effect of Everyday Politics on Decollectivization,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, May 1995, pp. 410, 415; Henry Kamm, *Dragon Ascending: Vietnam and the Vietnamese* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1996), pp.127-28; Turley, “‘More Friends, Fewer Enemies’: Vietnam’s Policy,” pp. 189-90; and Leifer, pp. 269-70.

¹⁴⁴Betts, p. 67.

The U.S. embargo was dropped in February 1994, and relations were normalized between the United States and Vietnam in July 1995. As has been discussed, however, neither of these developments constitute alliances; nor does either offer any real measure of protection against Chinese dominance in the South China Sea. The apparent belief of Vietnam's leaders that these developments might or do offer a level of protection, though, allows them to avoid taking real steps to defend their claims (i.e., developing viable naval and air forces), modifying their intractable position on the South China Sea, or developing a true and useful alliance. All of the above choices would involve economic and / or political costs that the VCP dares not risk incurring.

Despite forced adjustments to her strategic decision-making in so many areas, Vietnam remains over-extended in the South China Sea, laying claim to water and islands that she is not equipped to defend militarily against China's strength. This is due to both her long-running reluctance to yield to China, and an element of her current strategic culture that Vietnam's leaders continue to place stock in, despite its unreliability: her ability to attract benefactors who, in the interest of counter-balancing China, will come to Vietnam's aid. While her ability to attract protectors may return, I would suggest that it appears to be a cyclical, rather than permanent, characteristic. An important example of the cyclical nature of this characteristic involves the United States. Despite a prominent intersection of their national interests - counter-balancing Chinese power and hegemonic ambitions - the United States faces strong domestic constraints to any overt attempts to aid communist-led Vietnam, and Vietnam would face similar constraints to such a deal with the demonized former enemy. While there is low-level engagement on POW/MIA and medical matters, anything

approaching a security relationship between the two nations would almost certainly require a “cataclysmic” change: a collapse of communism in Vietnam.

Vietnam’s strategic culture has adjusted substantially in the wake of the “cataclysm” of the ending of Soviet aid and the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. But Vietnam has not suffered a “cataclysm” with regards to communist China. The 1979 attack by China, for instance, was both brief and limited, and it did not deter Vietnam from staying in Cambodia for over a decade. And China’s encroachments in the South China Sea have been gradual; largely peaceful (and when violent, brief); and accompanied by frequent insistence that China is dedicated to peaceful resolution and cooperation. As a result of the absence to date of a Chinese cataclysm, Vietnamese strategic culture has not adjusted sufficiently where China is concerned. And with each nation’s goals and stakes in the South China Sea appearing to be intractable, it is questionable if Vietnam’s strategic culture will adjust to her China threat *without* a cataclysm.

D. OPTIONS

Vietnam’s leaders are aware of options other than confrontation in resolving disputes with China, such as cooperation and appeasement, or “Finlandisation.”¹⁴⁵ VCP officials often comment that China is and always will be Vietnam’s biggest concern.¹⁴⁶ So why do Vietnam’s leaders appear to be proceeding slowly toward conflict with China over their

¹⁴⁵Gerald Segal, “East Asia and the ‘Constraint’ of China,” *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 4, Spring 1996; Leifer, p. 290; and Betts, p. 76.

¹⁴⁶Kamm, pp. 125-134, 138.

competing claims to the South China Sea?¹⁴⁷ Because the strategic culture that today's VCP has inherited and continues to nurture in order to promote itself and maintain its rule, has effectively eliminated the option of backing down from China. Instead I would suggest that the VCP too optimistically hopes that China will become preoccupied internally, back down, negotiate reasonably or indefinitely; that the shared ideology of communism, nominal as it may be, will encourage solidarity; or that external benefactors will once again help Vietnam to hold its ground.

The confidence that Vietnam can attract benefactors should be mitigated by the knowledge that China, France, the Soviet Union and the United States, in their various turns as protectors of Vietnam, each eventually failed in or quit that role. Still, the leadership believes Vietnam holds strategic attractions for other countries, and its post-Cold War policy of "more friends, less enemies" reflects this.¹⁴⁸ Another lesson which Vietnamese commonly perceive from their history is that backing down from China does not pay, and that standing up to the Chinese, while costly, has often kept Vietnam a distinct nation and people. Such a mindset could lessen the probability that Sino-Vietnamese disputes will be resolved through negotiations.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷Mamdouh Salameh, among others, considers likely the possibility of military conflict between China and Vietnam in the South China Sea. Salameh, p. 145. As alluded to earlier, most scholars who attempt to dismiss such worries still fill their arguments with caveats regarding timeframe. Wu and de Mesquita, pp. 379, 398-99. And Henry Kamm finds that "All Vietnamese pronouncements on China to a foreign inquirer, whether public or private, include a kind of statute of limitations in time." Kamm, pp. 125-33.

¹⁴⁸Turley, "More Friends, Fewer Enemies': Vietnam's Policy," pp. 189-90.

¹⁴⁹This is due to the nature of strategic culture discussed earlier: how "lessons learned" persist long after they are applicable. This can lead a state to take action that

Sino-Vietnamese negotiations on the South China Sea are ongoing, although neither side has displayed a consistent intent to compromise. The political, economic, and military incentives of each to maintain their claims seem to outweigh any incentive to compromise at this point. While it would probably be most rational - i.e., mutually beneficial economically - for each to cooperate and compromise, the possibility of the use of the more “irrational” course of forcible conquest cannot be lightly dismissed.¹⁵⁰

A military effort to resolve her disputes with China could be in the short term a unifying, anti-Chinese, nationalist force for a Vietnamese society that remains very much internally divided. But a defeat, which is the likeliest prospect considering the military balance, would surely result in a loss of legitimacy for the VCP, which long has portrayed itself as the sole guarantor of Vietnamese independence. The irony is that more economic devastation, loss of legitimacy, and political instability - not to mention the addition of conflict-related deaths - probably would result from a military encounter with China than from the diplomatic backing down that Vietnam’s leaders seem so reluctant to bring themselves to do.

appears to others to not be in its own best interests.

¹⁵⁰Peter Liberman, *Does Conquest Pay?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 4-5, 150-51; and Alvin and Heidi Toffler, *War and Anti-war: Survival at the Dawn of the 21st Century* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1993), p. 250.

V. CONCLUSIONS

A. THE SINO-VIETNAMESE RELATIONSHIP

Vietnam's strategic culture, while being modified over time, has remained constant in several ways. A most enduring feature, the goal of independence from foreign domination, derives from Vietnam's geographic proximity to China, repeated attempts by China throughout history to influence or dictate events in Vietnam, and the Vietnamese people's millennial desire to remain distinct from China. Yet their peoples are neighbors and they must coexist.

It is hard to overestimate the influence China has had on Vietnam. Vietnam over time adopted many of China's ways, even while strenuously resisting sinicization. It is, and long has been, a complicated relationship. As one scholar notes:

Sino-Vietnamese relations in the past were an enterprise of mutual interest. Politically and militarily, China was for Vietnam an administrative tutor as well as an aggressor; economically, China was a promoter and an exploiter; and culturally, China was both teacher and indoctrinator.¹⁵¹

Even the unifying ideology of communism, which did result in substantial Sino-Vietnamese cooperation (although never as much or as concerted cooperation as the United States feared), could not replace national interests as each country's leaders' top priority or erase the historical mistrust and hatred between the two peoples. Testament to the modern-day relevance of ancient antagonism is the special museum built in Hanoi by the Socialist

¹⁵¹King C. Chen, *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 12.

Republic of Vietnam - the state founded just two decades ago - dedicated solely to celebrating “the exploits of their heroes in the struggle against Chinese rule.”¹⁵²

The potential of conflict with China continues to be the prime strategic consideration for Vietnam’s leaders. Although today China’s leaders do not interfere directly in Vietnam’s internal affairs, they bristle all the same when convinced that China is not being given the respect or influence she deserves from her former suzerain.¹⁵³ Vietnam similarly bristles when she perceives an attempt by China to exert undue influence in Vietnam. Historically, then, it makes sense that “whenever Beijing has been forced to turn its attention inward to quell internal dissension, Vietnam’s security situation has correspondingly improved.”¹⁵⁴

But what is “internal” for China has changed in this recent decades. The South China Sea - where Vietnam has directly competing claims with China - is now clearly considered internal by China, and conflict between the two states in this region is probable in the future, whether China is “turned internal” or not.

B. VIETNAMESE STRATEGIC CULTURE

For most of its history, Vietnam encompassed not the territory held today, but rather only the comparatively small region around the Red River Delta called Tonkin, and its strategic culture was in large part dictated by its proximity to China. As Vietnam expanded during the past five centuries, its cohesiveness was diluted. Internal divisiveness markedly increased, unluckily just as Europeans began to arrive on the scene, leaving Vietnam

¹⁵²SarDesai, p. 13.

¹⁵³Xu Xiaojun, pp. 21-41.

¹⁵⁴Cima, p. xliv.

vulnerable to foreign intervention. Colonization by France gave warning to Vietnamese nationalists that her traditional, sinic ways were no longer supreme. The failure of the Chinese to promptly or adequately assist them, and the ultimate collapse of the Chinese Empire, reaffirmed this reality.

The search for new ways that followed, both spurred and enabled by French rule itself, brought changes to Vietnamese strategic culture. A relatively modern phenomenon - seeking out foreign benefaction to achieve Vietnamese goals - was exploited adroitly by Ho Chi Minh, the communist-nationalist revolutionary leader who emerged as the leader of Vietnam at the close of World War II. He came to embody a distinct Vietnamese strategic culture which was marked by pragmatism. Ho sought aid from any source, from Stalin to Truman. He temporarily subordinated his goal of communism, which had limited popular appeal, to that of nationalism. He made a deal with the French, as hated as they were, allowing their return to Vietnam in 1946, in order to rid Vietnam of a large and destructive Chinese occupation army. And for decades Ho sufficiently buried traditional Vietnamese rivalry and antagonism with China - even recognizing China's claims to sovereignty over the entire South China Sea - in order to achieve his immediate goals of victory and reunification.¹⁵⁵ He continued to pragmatically keep differences buried, even in the face of perceived Chinese betrayals to his cause.

Though Ho died in 1969, his immediate heirs continued in the path he had laid until victory over the south was achieved in 1975 and reunification was officially completed in

¹⁵⁵Valencia, p. 32.

1976. Shortly thereafter, however, adjustments to Vietnamese strategic culture became apparent. Following her dramatic victory a VCP hubris became evident, and this was enabled to persist by the transient historical anomaly of Soviet aid.¹⁵⁶ The result was a strategic culture increasingly ill-suited to her true strategic situation. The strategic necessity - and plain common sense - of maintaining good relations with the largest nation on earth on her border was ignored. Military conflict soon resulted, followed by a decade of less than optimal strategic decisions. Poverty thus remained for Vietnam while most of her neighbors, including China, transformed themselves economically, further decreasing Vietnam's power relative to her neighbors.

With Gorbachev's perestroika, Vietnam's rulers began to become more aware of their strategic realities. Their own campaign of change that followed, the economic renovation plan *doi moi*, brought some positive economic results, but dependence on the Soviets would persist. A true warning sign to the VCP that a change of strategic course was required appears to have been the PRC's setting up of 167 observation posts in the Spratlys in late 1987, followed by a March 1988 battle there against China. Three Vietnamese ships were sunk and 72 sailors lost, and the Soviets, more interested in rapprochement with China than

¹⁵⁶The lessons of benefaction from both the PRC and the Soviet Union helped shape Vietnam's current strategic culture. These lessons include the belief that Vietnam is a valuable strategic entity and is thus able to lure benefactors, but that Vietnam cannot trust its benefactors. (Even South Vietnam's experience with the United States teaches much the same lesson.) Soviet aid is gone forever, though, and rather than being a benefactor China is now the prime concern today for Vietnam in her foreign affairs and disputes, particularly in the South China Sea.

in protecting Vietnamese sea claims, did not come to Vietnam's assistance.¹⁵⁷ Two months later, Vietnam announced a new policy of "security independence," along with another new policy of seeking "more friends and fewer enemies."¹⁵⁸ The former, however, has not been as seriously pursued as the latter. Military capabilities, particularly relative to Chinese capabilities, have not significantly improved in recent years. Vietnam puts perhaps too much hope in the idea that "more friends" will provide her security.

C. STRATEGIC PREDICAMENT

By the late 1980's Vietnam's leaders were boxed into a strategic predicament. They needed their South China Sea claims for political legitimacy (due to both the financial benefits it provided and to nationalism / sovereignty issues) but were unable - due to the poverty and isolation her prior strategic choices caused her - or unwilling to acquire the military means necessary to properly defend Vietnam's claims. Instead of backing down and risking loss of legitimacy and perhaps their very rule, Vietnam's leaders turned to reliance on a modern element of her strategic culture - inherent geo-strategic attractiveness - and began the search for foreign benefactors, or "more friends."

They succeeded to some extent in these efforts, in 1995 joining ASEAN and gaining recognition from the United States. Neither of these developments, however - nor the development of significant trade relationships with Japan, South Korea, or Taiwan - have provided Vietnam with an assurance of protection against future Chinese aggression in the

¹⁵⁷SarDesai, p. 149.

¹⁵⁸Turley, "More Friends, Fewer Enemies': Vietnam's Policy," pp. 189-90.

South China Sea. And yet Vietnam has not sufficiently increased her military readiness since becoming unambiguously aware that it was quite on its own in the South China Sea in 1988. Since Vietnam's navy and air force in particular remain inadequate to defend its vast claims in the South China Sea, let alone its own coastline, Vietnam must fall in line with its ASEAN colleagues in seeking to implement its South China Sea claims. Yet inhibiting solidarity are Vietnam's conflicting sea claims with most of the other ASEAN nations.

With the conflicting South China Sea claims of Vietnam and China apparently intractable, conflict between them looms - conflict for which Vietnam is ill-prepared. With her leaders unwilling to either back down or prepare for conflict, and unable to attract a bona fide protector, it seems likely that a cataclysmic loss to China would be the only thing that would change Vietnam's current regime's strategic culture and enable it to become more appropriately matched to her actual geo-strategic position. The only alternative is negotiation. And yet the loss of legitimacy that either a defeat in the South China Sea or a backing-off of her claims would bring would probably result in at least a leadership change in Hanoi, if not an outright toppling of the VCP. Optimism about Chinese restraint toward a fellow nominally communist state, meanwhile, is unfounded, and faith in it enables Vietnam to avoid taking the steps necessary to properly defend its claims or to modify its stance on its claims.

D. APPLICABILITY

While the term “strategic culture” has never been fully embraced in the scholarly community and may fall out of favor,¹⁵⁹ the driving idea behind it will endure and remain valid. A people’s historical experiences, and the “lessons” they draw from that experience, are unique to them. A nation therefore will not necessarily follow any outside observers’ ideas of a rational strategic course for it. Rather, it is apt to follow its own rationale, derived from its own perceptions of historical experience. The result can be action which appears not to be in the nation’s own best interests. This gap between appropriate strategy and actual strategy can be explained in terms of strategic culture. It is hard to imagine, for example, that if China and Vietnam were each brand new countries Vietnam would act as belligerent, or as oblivious to the geopolitical implications of their size disparity, as it does today.¹⁶⁰ But Vietnam’s history tells her that to appease or back down from China tends to only whet Beijing’s appetite for influence over Vietnam. Thus Vietnam’s historical animosity with China overrides “natural” concerns of size disparity, and she acts belligerently.

The concept of strategic culture has been loathed and lauded. Like any model, it has its limitations, but it is useful in describing a nation’s general approach to dealing with strategic dilemmas. Strategic culture is particularly useful when a nation’s strategy persists in the face of disconfirming evidence of its viability. A nation’s strategic culture tends to

¹⁵⁹*The Economist*, “Cultural Explanations: The Man in the Baghdad Cafe - Which ‘Civilisation’ You Belong To Matters Less Than You Might Think,” 9 November 1996, pp. 23-26.

¹⁶⁰Duiker, p. 339.

persist until a “cataclysmic change” - be it political, military or technological - alters it. Victories (military or otherwise) tend to confirm to a nation’s leaders that their strategies are correct, and thus their strategic culture does not significantly change. It is cataclysmic failures that alter the strategic landscape. Vietnam’s intractable stance in the South China Sea stems from the lack to date of just such a cataclysm. And it is extremely likely that a cataclysmic development - such as a losing war with China, or a dramatic change to its political system that led to a security relationship with the United States - is exactly what it will take for Vietnam to either change her stance on the South China Sea or change her ability to defend it, thus adjusting her strategic culture to where it is more in line with Vietnam’s actual strategic situation.

Vietnam, like all nations - even the United States - must adjust to this element of the “Pacific Century” just ahead: the prospect of China being a great power, and one that is not averse to exercising its strength to achieve its goals. Due to geography, conflicting claims, and a turbulent historical relationship with China, it is in fact in the interests of Vietnam - the lost Chinese province - to adjust to this development earlier and better than most nations.

If American policymakers hope to continue to “engage” Vietnam in pursuit of U.S. national interests¹⁶¹ - whether to continue efforts to resolve POW/MIA issues, or to counter-balance increasing Chinese power and influence in Asia - it is essential that they understand and consider Vietnamese strategic culture. To do otherwise - to attempt to influence a nation in order to influence regional events, without an adequate effort to understand that nation

¹⁶¹Jim Abrams, “Adviser Outlines Foreign Policy Goals,” *The Monterey County Herald*, 9 December 1996, p. A-3.

on its own terms - has been tried before, to much grief on all sides. As the previous American experience in Vietnam suggests, to fail to understand an ally is as dangerous as the failure to know one's enemy.

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